BHAGAVATA MELA
&
ANCIENT TEMPLE THEATER FORMS OF SOUTH INDIA

E.15487

Edited By

Bharatam R. MAHALINGAM (a) MALI

Dr. MURALI RANGARAJAN

Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam

Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Natak Trust

Bhagavata Mela
&
Ancient Temple Theater Forms
Of South India

Edited By
Bharatam R. Mahalingam
Murali Rangarajan

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Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Natak Trust
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BHAGAVATA MELA & ANCIENT TEMPLE THEATER FORMS OF SOUTH INDIA*

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Lord Varadaraja

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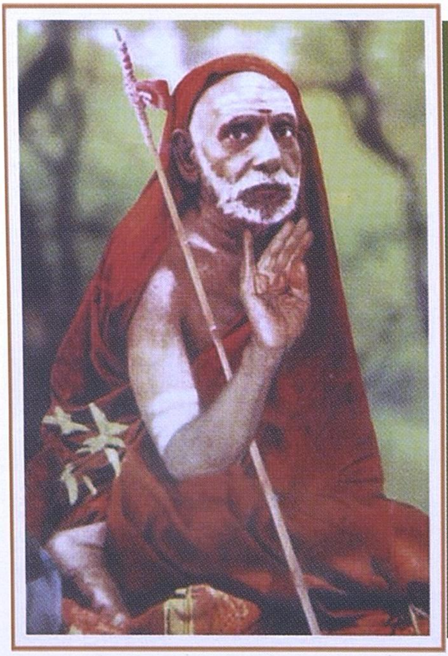
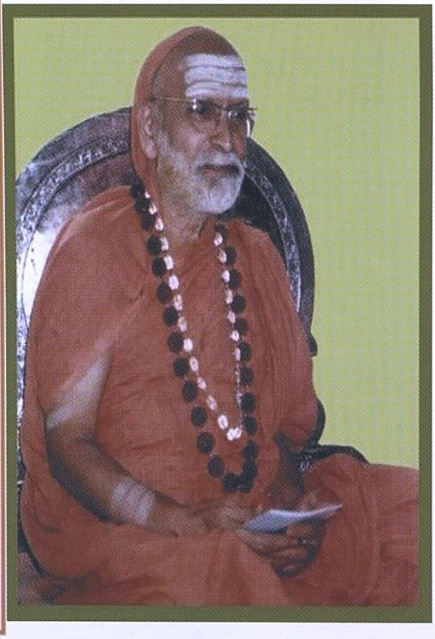
At Their Lotus Feet

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Our Heartfelt Gratitude To

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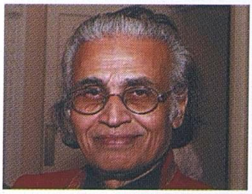

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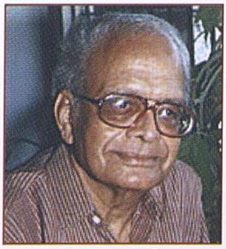

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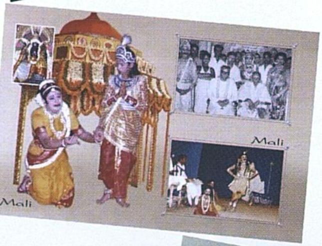
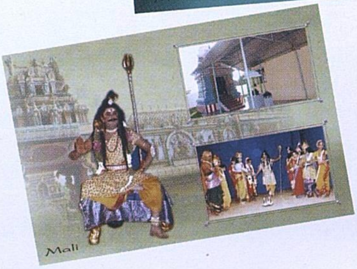
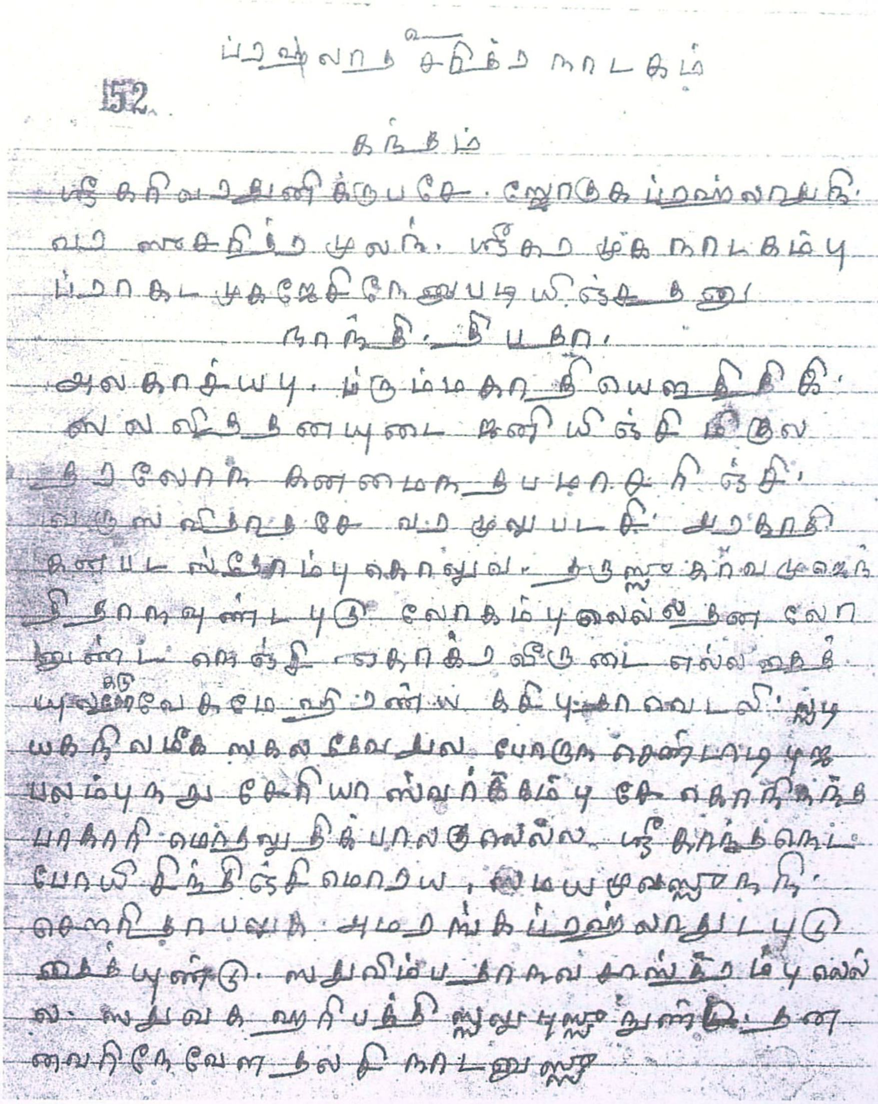




BharatamR. Mahalingam
(in many roles)


ப்ரஹ்லாத சரித்ர நாடகம்

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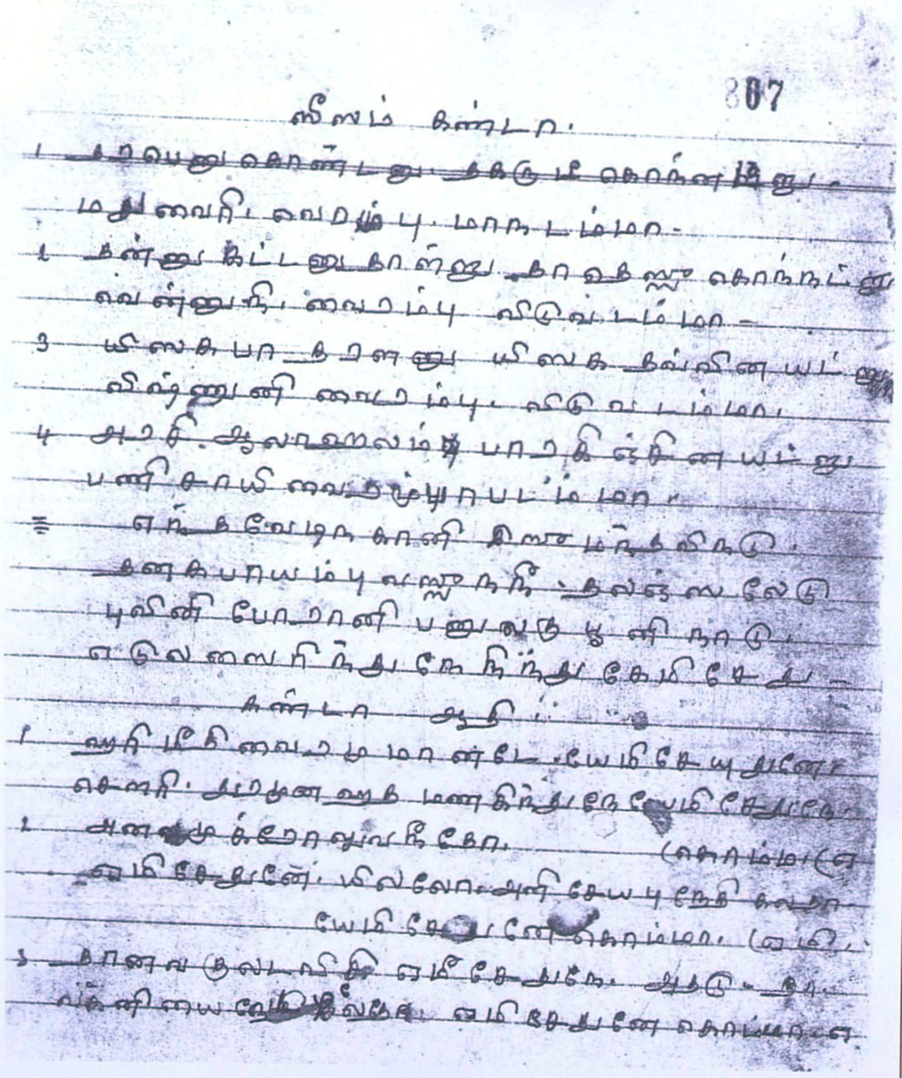
Kalyani Ammal's Notebook:

First Page of Prahlada Charitram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ஸீஸம் கண்டா.

Kalyani Ammal's Notebook :

Ghanta-raga Seesa and Tala Padyas (Prahlada)

Chairman's Felicitation

It gives me great pleasure to release this monograph on Bhagavata Mela and AncientTemple Theater Forms of South India. Temple theater forms are treasure troves of Indian culture, heritage, traditions, and folklore. Documenting the various temple theater forms, their musical, dance anddramatic aspects, and traditions is no easy task. Bhagavata Mela NatyaVidya Sangam and the editors are to be commended for taking up thisgargantuan task.

In this volume focusing on South Indian Theater Forms, the Sangam and the editors have assembled an impressive array of stalwarts in thefield of theater, drama, music, and dance, with vast experience amongstthem on the different temple theater forms. They all have studied,researched, and performed these arts for many years, and have sharedfirsthand accounts of the arts and their traditions. This volumecontains articles on Bhagavata Mela, Kuchipudi, Yaksha Ganam,Kootiyattam, Krishnattam, Kaisiki Puranam, and on the sculptures of Lord Narasimha, the Lord ofBhagavata Mela. Throughthe moving article by the Sri. V. P. Dhananjayan, the Sangam has honored theirGuru Padma Shri Balu Bhagavatar. It is through the tireless sacrificesof such jambhawans that these art forms have been preserved and handeddown to us. The editors have alsotraced the evolution of Bhagavata Mela from the time of *Bharatam* Natesa Iyer to the present. This is indeed rare and of immense value.

With itsdeep and diverse collection of chapters documenting manytemple theater forms of South India, this volume standsout as authentic documentation of rare art forms and the culturalheritage of India. I ardently hope that this monograph receives the widest readership befitting its highestscholarship.

***Padma Shri Nalli* Dr. Kuppusamy Chetti**
Chairman, Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Natak Trust

Editors' Preface

India's rich culturalheritage is preserved in its varied art forms. Among the diverse artsthat have been the cultural fabric of India are those that have beenperformed and fostered in and associated withtemples. Such art forms are many, rangingfrom Bhand Pather in Kashmir and Bhanai in Gujarat to Bhaona in Assamand Bhagavata Mela in Tamil Nadu. These art forms not only celebratevarious deities in our cultural pantheon but also are uniquerepositories of regional and local traditions and practices andfolklore. Taken together, they embody the underlying ethos of SanatanaDharma even while showcasing the astounding breadth and diversity ofthe Indian culture.

We are honored to be able to compile together in this monograph a tiny facet of the diverse heritage of Indian temple theater forms. The motivation behind this monograph is two-fold: to document the traditions of Bhagavata Mela as they have been and continue to evolve, and to highlight the synergies and diversities of some of the ancienttemple theater forms of South India. We have been fortunate to receive scholarly articles from renowned experts on such arts as Kootiyattam, Krishnattam, Yakshagana, Kuchipudi, Kaisiki Puranam, Bhagavata Mela (at Melattur, Thepperumanallur and Saliyamangalam), and temple sculptures of Lord Narasimha - the Lord of Bhagavata Mela. We thank the authors for providing authentic and well-researched articles on the various art forms. One remarkable fact stands out from these articles - our culture, Sanatana Dharma, continuously reinvents itself by diversely manifesting itself according to the traditions of time and place, even while using the stories of the yore to highlight the core spiritual values of our lives. Through these art forms, the spiritual values and the bhakti they imbue, the archetypal heroes and villains, their well-known lives, ends and evolution, Sanatana Dharma forms a living thread or Sutra that guides and propels us. By incorporating profoundly deep music, dance, theatrics, local customs, and temple traditions, these art forms create a fertile, multifaceted playground where our bonds with Sanatana Dharma are enriched and enlivened.

The various articles in the monograph highlight the traditions of the different temple theater forms, their evolution, and their roots in Sanatana Dharma. They showcase the breadth, depth, and scope of our culture, and the ways in which it permeates our life even as it reinvents itself for today's mores. We have put our best efforts to ensure that this monograph remains an authentic documentation of the different temple theater forms presented herein. Seen in a compendium of many such tomes, it is hoped that this monograph will add a new dimension to the existing knowledge of the different temple theater forms of South India.

This small work is dedicated at the Lotus Feet of the Almighty and the Gurus who have made the Sangam and us instruments to realize this modest vision. One of the editors (MR) offers his humble pranams and deepest gratitude to his Sadguru Sri Satupasi Maharaj, who has showered divine grace on him in and through all challenges, and has blessed him to be an instrument for this modest effort. Both editors thank their families for their unconditional love and untiring support and accommodation in the process of putting this monograph together.

So many people, through their tireless efforts, support, and vision have made the existence of this Sangam, its growth, and this book possible. We have tried our best to thank and honor them in the pages of the book. Due to time constraints, we could not get sufficient information about many people who have supported the art and/or have taken part in the art form including performances. We deeply regret missing out acknowledging anyone though it is entirely unintentional. We are overwhelmed by the positive encouragement, guidance, and support of many connoisseurs, patrons, and organizations. We humbly salute them, express our deepest gratitude, and request continued support and guidance. We hope that, by the Grace of Lord Lakshmi Narasimha, the Sangam continues to foster Bhagavata Mela and other temple theater forms, and contributes in its small way towards reinforcing our links to our ancient yet ever-relevant heritage.

R. Mahalingam (a) Mali
Murali Rangarajan

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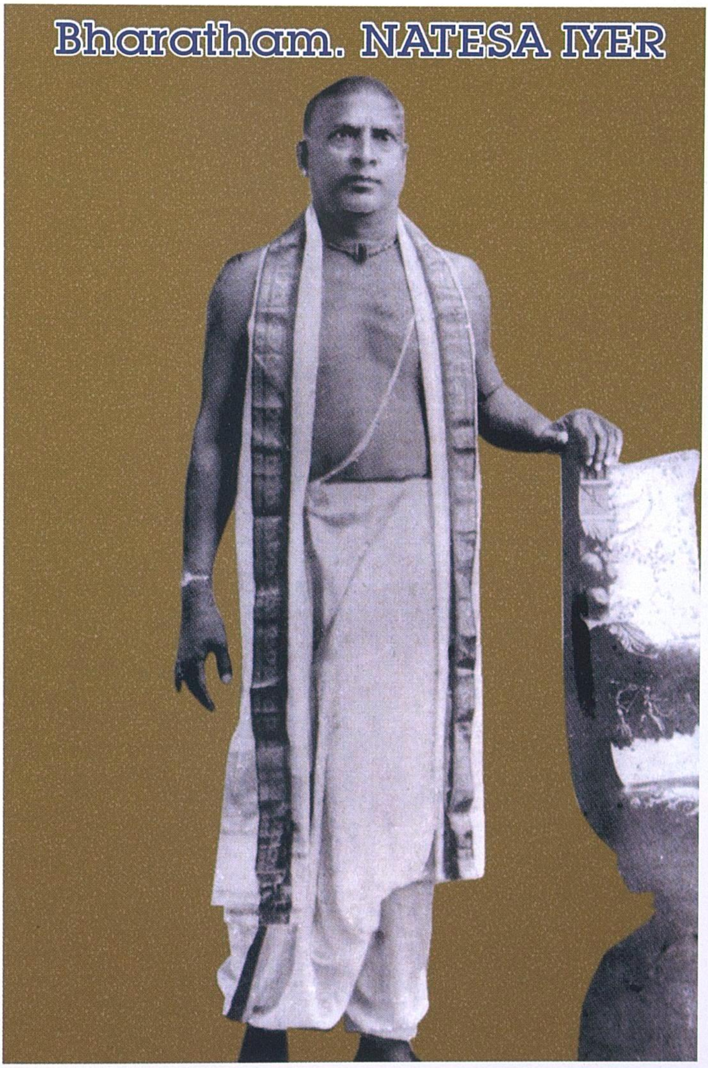
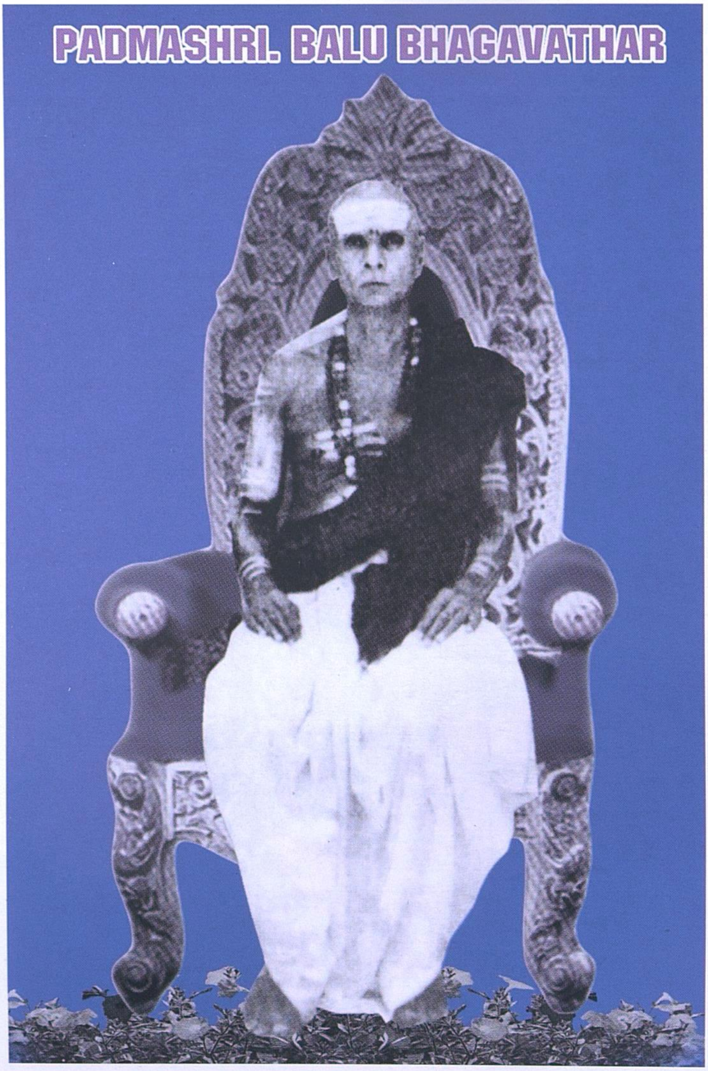
Part – I

THE GURUS

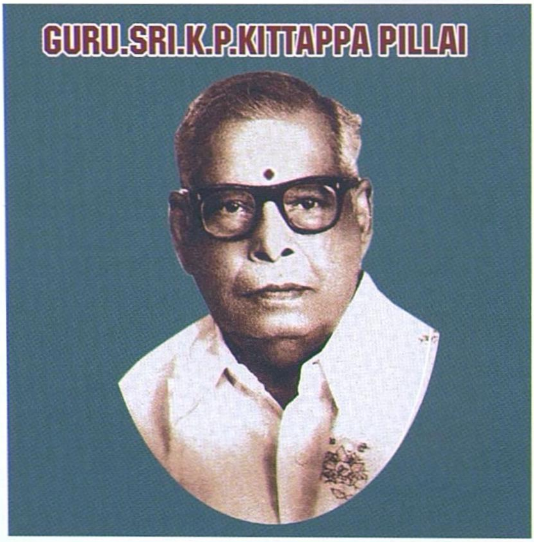


The Father of Bhagavata Mela

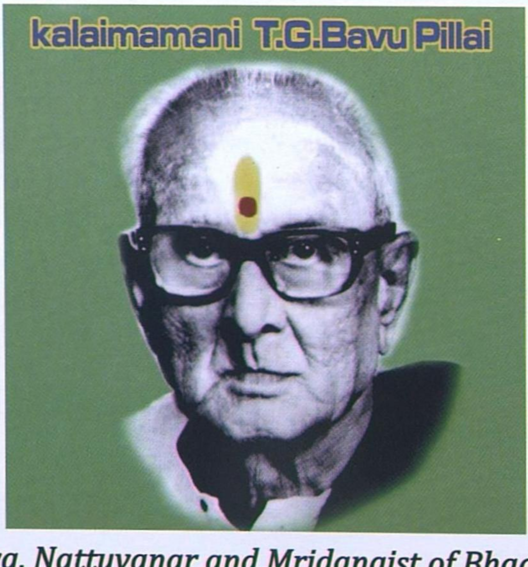


The Acharya of Bhagavata Mela

Kalaimamani P. K. Subbaier
(Disciple of Sangeeta Kalanidhi Sri. Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar and Lead Vocalist of Bhagavata Mela)



Natyacharya, Nattuvanar and Vocalist of Bhagavata Mela



Natyacharya, Nattuvanar and Mridangist of Bhagavata Mela

Nattuvanars

Kalaimamani B. Herambanathan

Sri. B. Jayabharathi

Musicians

N. Srinivasan

PapaP.S. Subramania Iyer

N. Nataraja Iyer

ThanjavurSankara Iyer

Padma ShriBalu Bhagavatar with disciples at Kalakshetra (Sri. V. P. Dhananjayan is in the top-left corner.)

Bharatam Natesa Iyer

The Father of Bhagavata Mela, as he is hailed, *Bharatam* Natesa Iyer was born at Melattur in the year 1875 to Panchanatheeswara Iyer and Shivakamasundari. After completing his studies till eighth form at Melattur itself, Natesa Iyer trained himself in music and harikatha from experts in Thanjavur. At this time, the Bhagavata Mela natakams of Melattur Venkatarama Sastri, which had been conducted at Melattur by Sastri himself and then by others from Melattur, had stopped being performed. Realising the depths of dramatic, dance, musical and literary content in these natakams, and the elegance with which they were presented, Natesa Iyer took it upon himself to revive the art form. To this end, he sought Sri. Sabhapati Nattuvanar, a direct descendant of the great Tanjore quartet, and learned dance from him. He worked with the experienced Bhagavata Mela artistes of the village and learned the traditions of the art form. Training younger artistes, he re-launched the performance of the Natakams of Sri. Venkatarama Sastri in 1928. The first performance was Prahlada Charitram, with Natesa Iyer as Leelavati, and his disciples Melattur Ramani Iyer and Melattur Narayanaswami Iyer as Hiranyakashipu and Prahlada, respectively. Natesa Iyer was hailed as the foremost exponent of Bhagavata Mela after Venkatarama Sastri himself. He was honored as the Father of Bhagavata Mela, while Sastri is known as the Pitamaha of Bhagavata Mela. In addition to Prahlada Charitram, Natesa Iyer also revived Usha Parinayam, Markandeya, Harischandra, and all the natakams of Sastri.

Natesa Iyer was also a highly proficient Harikatha exponent. However, having dedicated his life and soul for the upliftment of Bhagavata Mela, he did not perform Harikatha extensively. However, he did train a few exponents of the art form. Chief among his Harikatha disciples is Smt. Padmasini Bai, daughter of Smt. Andalammal, a dancer from Tiruvallikkeni, Chennai. Padmasini Bai was introduced to Natesa Iyer through his friend Varadam Iyengar (a) Duraisami Iyengar. Natesa Iyer trained her in Harikatha, including the use of nritta (adavus) and abhinayas at suitable occasions during a Harikatha performance. In addition to Padmasini Bai, he also trained Smt. Lalitha of Bangalore in Harikatha.

Among those who learned dance from Natesa Iyer include Nallur *Bharatam* Narayanaswami Iyer, Smt. Yamuna, Smt. Krishnambal, Mangudi Dorairaja Iyer, and Sri. E. Krishna Iyer.

Among those who were trained in Bhagavata Mela by Natesa Iyer include Melattur *BharatamJohn* Narayanaswami Iyer (he accompanied Padmasini Bai in vocals in all her Harikatha performances), 'Kiruku' Sama Iyer, Kinchin Kotandarama Iyer, Ramani Iyer, *Padma Shri*Balu Bhagavatar, Pichu Bhagavatar, and more. Of these, Narayanaswami Iyer and Kotandarama Iyer accompanied Natesa Iyer in his Harikatha performances by giving vocal support.

Natesa Iyer married Smt. Mangalam Ammal, and had two daughters Kalyani Ammal and Kunjammal. He adopted the son of Smt. Kunjammal, Sri. Sethuraman. Smt. Kalyani Ammal co-wrote and preserved the Bhagavata Mela natya natakam notebooks of Natesa Iyer, and handed them over to *Bharatam* R. Mahalingam (a) Mali and to Kalakshetra. Four palm leaf manuscripts of Bhagavata Mela are preserved at U. Ve. Sa. Memorial Library at Chennai, and one (Harischandra) is being preserved by *Bharatam* R. Mahalingam.

Natesa Iyer passed away due to declining health on the 31st May 1931 on the way to Melattur by train from Chennai. At the very end of his life, he wanted to be at Melattur and with his art. It is by the Divine Grace of Lord Lakshmi Narasimha and tireless efforts of many artistes and connoisseurs that this art form has survived the test of time and is being nurtured further, fulfilling his long-cherished dream.

Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam offers humble pranams at the feet of this giant who preserved this rare art form for our generation and the future.

(Translated and Adapted from ***"Katha Kalakshepa Kalaiyum Kalaignargalum"*** **by** ***Harikatha BharatamSri.*** **N. Srinivasan**)

Padma Shri Balu Bhagavatar

Balu Bhagavatar (a) Balasubramanya Sastrigal was born in November 1900 at Melattur to Sri. Vishwanatha Bhagavatar. He is the maternal grandson of Umayalpuram Krishna Bhagavatar, a direct disciple of Sadguru Thyagaraja Swami, and the initiator of the famed Umayalpuram school of music. He is hailed as the pioneer of Bhagavata Mela, having revived, structured, and developed the art form after the time of *Bharatam* Natesa Iyer. He learned Sanskrit from Melattur Sitarama Iyengar, and music from his grandfather Umayalpuram Krishna Bhagavatar. He considered *Bharatam* Natesa Iyer as his manasika Guru. After the time of Natesa Iyer, Bhagavata Mela performances at Melattur had fallen into disarray. Balu Bhagavatar was instrumental in reviving the art along with other disciples of Natesa Iyer, Nallur Narayanaswami Iyer,Nallur Pichu Bhagavatar and Ramani Iyer. He started training young artistes, and first staged *Markandeya* in 1938 at the premises of the temple for Lord Dhakshinamurthy Vinayaga Swami at Melattur. He took charge of choreography and direction of the Natakams.

Till 1964, the Natakams took place at Ganesa temple, Siva temple, and then that of Lord Varadaraja. However, these performances did not take place under the aegis of a formal organization. Upon the formation of Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam in 1964, Balu Bhagavatar enthusiastically led the Sangam's performances in choreography and direction till his death in 1975. At the request of Rukmini Devi Arundale, Balu Bhagavatar spent nearly three years at Kalakshetra, teaching Bhagavata Mela to students there. Balu Bhagavatar was awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1967 and the Padma Shri award in recognition to his services to the art form in 1973.

Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam offers humble obeisance at the feet of this Mahatma who taught us sacrifice and dedication.

Padma Shri Balu Bhagavatar

Padma Bhushan V. P. Dhananjayan

Balu Thatha as we fondly addressed him was a simple, humble unassuming person with frail demure. He was fastidiously religious and austere and Brahmanical to the core. He had no compromise on his morning oblations and eating habits. No food from our hotel cooked by Nair Iyers. (That is how we used to call our cooks in the Kalakshetra hostel). Balu Thaatha's sister used to cook for him his own simple food and we can only help him externally. All said and done he was the most affectionate grand father figure to all us who were cast in the "Ushaparinayam" Bhagavatha Mela Naatya Naatakam being revived at Kalakshetra in the year 1958-60, if I remember correctly.

Shanta and Krishnaveni were directly placed under him. Shanta and Krishnaveni were exempted from attending their regular classes of Naatya and Sangeetam for a whole year and assigned the duty of looking after the sweet gentle old man and he would treat them just like his own daughters. He had a special eye for Shanta as she resembled his own daughter who died many years ago. He would wipe his tears narrating the story of losing a loved one.

He spent the whole day teaching these girls the Telugu songs and explaining them the nuances of Telugu literature and the in-depth meaning. He was an excellent singer, who had the entire text on his finger tips. Never referred to a book, only his memory. Shanta recollects how he so simply demonstrated the subtle 'Sringarabhaava' and explained the sensitive 'abhinaya' of virgin women who reacts to falling in love with opposite sex. I believe these teenage girls would giggle and feel shy of his casual treatment of the sensitive subject. He would tell them not to giggle or make fun of the art.

I personally had individual sessions with Thaatha as Anirudha. I still remember him demonstrating how Anirudha addressed Usha "chakkara bommaro" (oh sweet doll like one) and try to entice her into

a love game. He had no inhibitions whatsoever when showing 'sringaara' and touching a girl. In the actual Bhaagavata Mela performances, however, men played women roles. So men characters, knowing well their heroine is only a man, would have no hesitation to go closer. But we had to remind him "Thaatha, Usha is a real girl, and we cannot or we are not allowed to touch her freely like how you showed". 'Yes!,' he would then realize and make suggestive approach.

All men's characters he would show with appropriate stances and gestures. I think he was almost 75 years when he taught us in Ķalakhsetra and we had great fun with him and even teasing him at times. He would take it lightly and smile with his red teeth with paan (chewing beetle nuts) scars.

Balu Bhagavatar adored Periya Sarada Teacher who took down notes from him and recorded the traditional steps and mudras. After Balu Bhagavatar's individual sessions with all of us, Rukmini Devi rearranged and choreographed certain entries and exits to suite a proscenium stage without eschewing the identity of the Bhaagavata Mela method. Balu Bhagavatar appreciated the new steps and placement of the characters on stage to give a completely new look to his own rustic drama.

Though he was commissioned to complete Usha Parinayam, during the course of his stay in Kalakshetra he also taught us 'Rukmaangada Charitam'. We all gained a lot from this grand old man who was really an inspiring Sage-like Guru. Even at that ripe age he never lost his temper or raised his voice to reprimand us. He was a role model for many of the Gurus in the campus. He was such a lovable "Ţhaatha" whose memory we still instill in us, as well as the values of tradition and austere life of disciple, devotion and dedication he showed in his life.

If I may add, the survival of Bhagavata Mela Naatya Naatakam owes a great deal to Balu Bhagavathar and his lineage.

(Article by Naatyaachaarya V.P.Dhananjayan and direct disciple of Balu Bhagavathar)

Kalaimamani P. K. Subbaier

Kalaimamani Sri. P. K. Subbaier was born in Melattur to Sri. Kailasam Iyer and Smt. Lakshmi. He got his musical initiation from *Umayalpuram* Krishna Bhagavatar, a direct disciple of Sadguru Thyagaraja Swami. Then he underwent advanced musical training from *Sangeeta Kalanidhi* Ramanathapuram Srinivasa Iyengar (Poochi Iyengar) and*Sangeeta Kalanidhi* Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. After the passing away of *Bharatam* Natesa Iyer in 1931, Subbaier took up the musical aspects of Bhagavata Mela and revived the art form along with *Padma Shri*Balu Bhagavatar and other senior artists.

In recognition of his yeoman services to Carnatic Music and Bhagavata Mela, the Tamil Nadu Iyal Isai Nataka Mandram honored him with the *Kalaimamani* award. He passed away in 1998. The Sangam and the art form owes him for preserving the musical traditions of Bhagavata Mela, particularly the rendition of rare ragas such as Ghanta and Kumbhakambhoji, and the renditions of rare prayogas in many ragas such as Ananda Bhairavi. In fact, in 1953, *Sangita Kalanidhi* Smt. M. S. Subbulakshmi and Sri. Sadasivam visited Melattur and particularly heard Sri. Subbaier's rendition of Ghanta.

Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam offers its humble pranams at the feet of this musical genius who lived a life of total simplicity, humility, and dedication to this music and Bhagavata Mela.

Kalaimamani T. G. Bavu Pillai

Kalaimamani Sri. T. G. Bavu Pillai was born in 1902 at Thanjavur to Sri. Gopalsamy and Smt. Jeevayi Ammal. From the age of 10, he learned mridangam from Thanjavur Sri. K. Mahalingam Pillai for 6 years. Since then he began to play mridangam for the Bharata Natyam concerts of Thanjavur Sri. Vadivel Nattuvanar's troupe.

In 1961, he toured Malaysia, Singapore and other countries as Bharata Natyam mridangist. He was honored by the nattuvanars of Thanjavur, dancers, and sangeetha vidwans with a golden pendant in a public function presided over by the Late Sangeetha Vidwan Mannargudi Sri. Rajagopala Pillai.

He served in the field of mridangam art for over 60 years. He was also a mridangam teacher in the Bharata Natyam schools of Thanjavur and taught mridangam to many students. In Pandanallur, he accompanied on mridangam for the Bharata Natyam concerts by the disciples of Sri. Meenakshisundaram Pillai. In Thanjavur Periya Kovil, he played mridangam for many years for the natakam 'Sarabendra Bhoopala Kuravanji'. He was the nattuvanar for Melattur Bhagavata Mela for over a decade.

In recognition of his contributions to the field of mridangam and dance, he was awarded the *Kalaimamani* by the Tamil Nadu Iyal Isai Nataka Mandram.

Natya Kalanidhi K. P. Kittappa Pillai

Late Sri K. P. Kittappa Pillai, the legendary Bharata Natyam Guru hails from the lineage of the famous Tanjore Quartet and was the eighth generation of the ancestry. He had his initial training in music and Bharata Natyam under his grandfather, Late Shri Guru Pandhanainallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, later underwent enhanced training in music under the tutelage of his father late Shri K. Ponniah Pillai. This prodigy was also a renowned mridangam vidwan.

Sri K. P. Kittapa Pillai has trained many leading dance artistes and choreographed numerous dance dramas. To the credit of Melattur Bhagavata Mela, this maestro has composed music as well as choreographed the dance for a number of Bhagavata Mela Dramas which have been well acclaimed. A memory that has to be brought to the fore; Shri K. P. Kittapa Pillai has been on the nattuvangam for several Bhagavata Mela Dance Dramas.

Sri. K. P. Kittappa Pillai was honored with several awards including Isai Perarignar, Kalaimamani, Natya Kalanidhi, Kalidas Samman and Sangeet Natak Akademi Award.

Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam very humbly salutes this great legend.

Part - II

BHAGAVATA MELA

Melattur Bhagavata Mela[1]

[illegible]ram Mahalingam and Dr. Murali Rangarajan

What is Bhagavata Mela?

Bhagavata Mela is a regional temple theatre form presented through the medium of classical dance and classical music. This blend of theatre and dance has been performed for over five centuries. Throughout this time, one of the most unique aspects of Bhagavata Mela has been that all the roles – dancing, acting, singing etc. – have been performed only by men. In the earlier days, this was one of the very few avenues available for men to dance and has been a rich source of dance compositions, dance forms, musical compositions and unique rendering of ragas. Bhagavata Mela is also unique in that it is still performed not as a commercial enterprise but as a devotional prayer of surrender to the Lord Sri Lakshmi Narasimha.

For those who love classical dance, Bhagavata Mela is a feast for the eye. For those who love music, Bhagavata Mela has classical Carnatic music at its best. For those who love drama, Bhagavata Mela is a living link to our ancient heritage of theatre as laid down in Bharata's Natya Sastra. Thus, Bhagavata Mela is a unique blend of spirituality, dance, drama and chaste classical music.

In a Bhagavata Mela natakam, Bhagavatars sing, dance and enact mythological stories with devotion and dedication. These stories are often culled from the Shaivite and Vaishnavite religious movements, which wielded a powerful influence on Hindu culture. Vaishnavite and Tamil and Telugu-speaking Smartha Brahmins, dedicated to the Narasimha cult, have performed Bhagavata Mela in Thanjavur for centuries. Thanjavur earned recognition as an ancient capital of arts in South India, owing to the continued royal patronage for arts from Chola, Nayak and Maratha rulers. Thanjavur was a natural crucible where Tamil, Telugu and Marathi culture blended into one

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[1]Edited, Revised and Expanded from ***"Bhagavata Mela"***, ***Indu Raman*** in Bhagavata Mela journal 2002

rich heritage. Owing to its special geographical location in the Cauvery delta, the place attracted kings, peasants and artists alike.

The Bhagavatas of Melattur were male Brahmin priests who had been performing the ancient art of Bhagavata Mela as ritualistic worship of Lord Vishnu, the Protector of the Universe. They were devotees of Lord Narasimha, whose temple existed at the banks of the Narayana Theertha, a pond on the west side of Melattur village. Among the noted descendant of these Bhagavatas is the renowned Melattur Venkatarama Sastri, composer of at least 10 Bhagavata Mela dance dramas, whose works are the most prolifically performed today and stand testimony to the richness, grandeur and devotion inherent in this unique tradition.

In addition to Melattur, Bhagavata Mela is being or has been performed traditionally in Oothukkadu, Thepperumanallur, Nallur, Soolamangalam, Saliyamangalam and Mannargudi.All these villages are in the Thanjavur district. Bhagavata Mela performances also took place in Thanjavur palaces. From historical evidence archived in Saraswati Mahal Library of Thanjavur, one can find that many Bhagavata Mela artistes lived in a village called Deepambalpuram (named after a Thanjavur Marathi Chola queen), including Sri. Giriraja Kavi, the maternal grandfather of Sadguru Sri Thyagaraja Swami. Swami himself therefore is one of the descendants of Bhagavatas, also as evidenced by his own composition in the Bhagavata Mela tradition, *Nouka Charitramu.*

Some of the unique aspects of the Bhagavatas and the tradition include:

1. Bhagavatas are devoted to Lord Lakshmi Narasimha Swami as their Ishta Devata.
2. Bhagavatas are not an itinerant group, though there are records of their performances for the royal patrons.
3. Bhagavatas are not professional performers. They were landowners or, these days, hold professional jobs. The dancers

of the Bhagavata Mela troupe do not accept monetary rewards for their participation.

4. All the participants were male Brahmins.
5. Certain roles are inherited by the actor and are a precious heirloom handed over by father to son. This tradition is followed even today.
6. Melattur natakams focus on the divine sentiment (bhakti). Even though there are dramas in the current repertoire of the Sangam which focus on romance (shringara: such as *Sakuntalam* of King Ekoji II), Bhakti is the overarching emotional focus of all performances.
7. Melattur composers of the period of and before Sadguru Sri Thyagaraja Swami composed dance forms such as Swarajati, Shabdam and Thillana. These, along with similar compositions in Sadir and Kuchipudi,have been incorporated into present-day Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi.

After the end of Maratha rule in Thanjavur, music, dance and Bhagavata Mela rapidly declined, resulting in great loss to our culture. The loss of great manuscripts, links in oral tradition and discontinuation of the actual practice of the natakams may probably be attributed this dark period. Though tremendous efforts have been and are being taken to revive this tradition, today, Bhagavata Mela continues to be classified under vanishing traditions of South India.

Traditions in Bhagavata Mela

Bhagavata Mela is an ancient temple tradition of dance, music and drama in Thanjavur dating to earlier than five centuries. It has been preserved since the times of Thanjavur Nayak Kings and Thanjavur Marathi Kings and is being nurtured and developed today by a handful of organizations including Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam, Melattur.

The first and foremost tradition of Bhagavata Mela is that the dance dramas, particularly, *Prahlada Charitramu* of Melattur Venkatarama Sastri, are being performed during Narasimha Jayanthi of

every year, with the exception of a few breaks in the 20th century. A detailed timeline of the development of the art form since 1920's has been provided at the end of this article and has been discussed below. Bhagavata Mela imbibes and reflects the traditions, bhavas (emotions), styles and the literary patterns of the Thanjavur composers of the times of 16th to 19th century, including Melattur Sri Venkatarama Sastri and Sadguru Sri Thyagaraja Swami. Some of the unique aspects of Bhagavata Mela traditions include:

All roles on and off-stage – be they singing, dancing or dramatic or make-up and other supporting roles - are performed exclusively by men. While these men were earlier all from Melattur and all Brahmins, these days this is no longer strictly followed. However, the female roles are still performed only by men with exquisite grace, upholding the traditional feminine values inherent in the culture.

Literary Traditions of Melattur Bhagavata Mela

Every dance drama starts with an opening ***Melaprapthi***, which acts as an overture to the drama, offers prayers to God, gives the summary of the story to the audience and serves as warm up to the singers, nattuvanars and even dancers, interspersed as it is with a number of solkattus in different talams (thisram, chatusram, khandam, misra chapu and misra jhampai) and musical pieces in different ragams. It sets the ambience and the stage for the drama to begin. This sequence is in accordance with the Purvaranga, as detailed by the Natya Sastra.

Konangi Patra Pravesham: This is unique to the compositions of Melattur Venkatarama Sastri. There is a sculpture of the konangi in a pillar of the darbar (court) of Thanjavur palace. Konangi is the first character to appear on any Melattur Bhagavata Mela performance. He is dressed as a traditional Bhagavatar but sports a conical cap pointed to the back. He carries a scarf, held across and above his head. He capers about, beating to the rhythms of the Patra Pravesham sung in Kambodhi ragam and set to Chatusra Eka talam. This is part of Melaprapthi.

Sharanu Daru & Thodaya Mangalam: Melattur Bhagavata Mela features Sharanu Daru and Thodaya Mangalam. These forms appeared in Kumbakonam area of Tamil Nadu due to the saint Bhodendra Swami and are part of the *Bhajanotsavam* traditions of Thanjavur. They are also seen in *Chinna Melam* or *Sangeetha Melam*, which are composed with the patron kings as the main characters, highlighting their virtue, valor, charm and wealth.

Shabdam: Melattur Shabdams have become popular in the dance tradition. They have simple lyrics and sollukattu. They are composed in Kambodhi ragam and set to Misra Chapu talam. In the Bhagavata Mela Natakams, Shabdams sometimes contain the summary of the story of the play, and such compositions are called katha sangraha shabdams. In Rukmini Kalyanam, the shabdam contains the summary of Ramayana.

Ganapathy Patra Pravesham: This is a Thanjavur tradition seen only in plays in this region. Lord Ganapathy appears to bless the performance and the Utsavam to take place without any troubles. Usually, a young boy is chosen for this character. He wears a mask and enters dancing while the musicians sing the daru. Sometimes an elder Bhagavatulu accompanies him on stage. At the end of the daru, Ganapathy is led to his seat. The Bhagavatar offers flowers and arathi and leads the masked boy off stage.

Kattiakkaran and Sutradhar: The play properly begins with the entry of this character who is usually the hero's courtier or announcer. Where a kattiakkaran cannot exist (as in when the hero is not a king), this character may also be the sutradhar (literal meaning: holder of strings) of the play. The pravesha daru describes his costume, actions and duties. The kattiakkaran wields a stick and warns the audience to be silent. He heralds the arrival of his royal master. Bhagavata Mela natakams of Venkatarama Sastri have long passages to speak for the sutradhar. After him, the hero and then the heroine enter the stage.

Patra Pravesha Darus: Patrapravesha darus are indicative of the personality traits of the character. They describe the costume, the gait, the expression on the face and the actions to be performed by the actor. The consequences of his arrival on the environment are graphically enlisted. The atmosphere that prevails is also mentioned.

The ingenious use of the Patrapravesha lyrics as stage instructions and directror's notes is admirable. If we study the patrapravesham of Hinranyakashipu in *Prahlada Charitamu*, this becomes quite clear: "Hiranyakashipu entered with a fast gait. Asura courtiers accompanied him with demonic actions and gestures. The earth trembled with the firm footsteps of the valiant, unrivalled warrior. His face reflected the pride and self-importance. Ministers and generals stood by his side. The king rested his arms on their shoulders as he walked majestically. People in all directions extolled his virtues".

In the patrapravesha darus of heroines, there is the tradition of two other female characters holding a screen to cover the heroine and dancing a prelude called *thiraippadu* before the character is revealed slowly to the audience.

Other literary devices used in the natakam are Dwipada (couplets), Seesa padyam (lyrics sung without rhythm), Gandhapadyams and Churnikas. These are verses with couplets, quatrains and the like. The text of the natakam contains dialogues to be spoken by some of the characters. These dialogues are laden with wisdom and philosophical truth, even as they advance the story. The natakams reveal Venkatarama Sastri's deep knowledge of Sanskrit, music, Natya Shastra, theatre traditions and aesthetics. In his *Prahlada Charitramu* and *Rukmini Kalyanam* plays, Sastri also employs characters such as kurathi and kudukuduppandi (fortune tellers) in Rukmini Kalyanam, and pambatti (snake charmer) and mallars (wrestlers) in Prahlada. These characters are typically rural characters and are created for the rural audience.

Musical Traditions of Melattur Bhagavata Mela

The predominantly used musical form in Bhagavata Mela is the ***daru***. Six kinds of daru are mentioned in the Natya Shastra, in the Dharuvadhyaya. The first is the Praveshika daru, which introduces each character. Other varieties employed in this tradition are the samvada daru (conversation), pralapa daru (exposition), thillana daru, charanu daru (song of worship or surrender) and mangala daru (song

of glory and auspiciousness). Darus are also called dhruvas, as they link the central ideas of the story. A daru's structure is similar to that of a kriti, the presently popular musical composition in Carnatic music. It is divided into Pallavi, Anupallavi and Charanams. As in kritis, pallavis and charanams are usually in the madhya sthayi (medium octave) or mandra sthayi (lower octave) while anupallavi is primarily in the thara sthayi (higher octave). Some darus may not have anupallavi. In most instances, particularly in Praveshika darus, the anupallavi is sung first for dramatic effect.

Darus are usually composed in rakthi ragas, chosen for their emotive powers, bhava or sentiment. This makes the music sensitive and delectable. The ragas are chosen to illuminate the nature and the character of the artistes or the nature of the situation. Some of the ragas used for patra pravesha darus include Begada (Ganesha in *Prahlada*, Rukmini in *Rukmini Kalyanam*), Devagandhari (Hiranyakashipu in *Prahlada*, Dasharatha in *Seetha Kalyanamu*), Atana (Leelavati in *Prahlada*, Chandramathi in *Harichandra*), Bhairavi (Prahlada in *Prahlada*) and Kambodhi (Harichandra in *Harichandra*). Also rakthi ragas like Mukhari, Dhanyasi, Ghanta, Manji, Saranga, Abhogi and Ahiri are used in other darus. Ragas like Ghanta and Kumbha Kambodhi are specialties of the Bhagavata Mela tradition.

While manuscripts clearly indicate the raga to be used for each daru, some changes have been down the years. There are two reasons for this: the first reason is that these songs have come down in oral tradition wherein some changes made by earlier masters have become accepted practice. Secondly, when a natakam is being newly reconstructed, the chief musician decides on the final selection, particularly if the same raga is being repeated consecutively or the raga mentioned in the script is deemed unsuitable. However, in any changes made, the endeavor is always to preserve the purity of the Carnatic music of the pre-Thyagaraja period and to follow closely the Bhagavata Mela style of presentation. In fact, except in the case of *Prahlada Charitramu*and *Harichandra*, which have been performed most regularly, no reasonable claim can be made that the original

music is entirely preserved. The musicians of the Sangam today use the notebooks belonging to*Bharatam* Natesa Iyer (1855 - 1931). The songs and the notation have been handwritten by his daughter Kalyaniammal. The Telugu lyrics are written in Tamil script. This could lead to mispronunciation of the words. However the team of artistes includes literary scholars who ensure such mistakes are eliminated.

The lyrics of darus are replete with a remarkable array of musical devices such as yati, prasam, anuprasam and yamakam. They display the mastery of Melattur Venkatarama Sastri on the Telugu language and his intimate knowledge of how to employ these skills to the making of sublime and divine music.

The time-hour theory of ragams is followed in the compositions. For instance, Bhoopalam is sung at the crack of dawn, towards the end of the play.

Dance Traditions of Melattur Bhagavata Mela

Compositions suitable for dance have always been a part of Bhagavata Mela. Alarippu, Swarajathis, Jathiswarams, Padavarnams and Thillana have been introduced mainly in the Pravesha darus. Melattur Shabdams are famous and have found their way into the Kuchipudi repertoire. Alarippus are set to the talam of the daru and are performed in any or all of the five gatis. One of the specialties of Bhagavata Mela dance today is to see the performance of alarippus in all five gatis, in many talas including adi (2 kalai), rupakam or adi (tisra gati) and misra chapu, and at various eduppus, as the daru demands.

Intricate rhythmic variations executed with footwork, particularly *Meiyyadavus*, are a specialty of the Melattur style. The dancers incorporate both Nritta (footwork) and Natya (expressional dance) while performing darus. There is restrained dignity and grace in the movement of the young boys who don female roles. Patrapravesha darus of the heroine sometimes include alarippu, padavarnam or a thillana. Even the abhinaya passages in other darus are executed with crisp footwork. Every actor displays at least a

minimum understanding of rhythmic patterns. The most important aspect of the dances in Bhagavata Mela is that performance is a living ritual worship. Everyone involved in the natakam does it as worship irrespective of whether they are dancers, actors, singers or technicians. The whole tradition is nurtured by the underlying deep devotion to Lord Narasimha.

Bhagavata Mela: The Ambience

The traditions of Thanjavur are magical with an aura of antiquity. Modern technology somehow still seems to not have ultimately erased the strains of quaint past that suffuse the villages there. As one steps into a village like Melattur, it is immediately apparent that the ancient and the recent coexist in harmony. While the latter is louder and easily visible, the entire place is bathed in the former, which drives every activity from its core. Quaint as the past may be, it is filled with memories and whispers of a highly evolved tradition deep in wisdom. Remnants of the ancient tradition are to be seen everywhere from the way old houses are constructed to the temples to the roads and the fields to the ways and customs of the people that live in these villages. Yet, slowly but surely, the recent developments in technology that have no doubt reformed the very fabrics of society are also bringing with them the cultures and traditions of the west. A dying tradition like Bhagavata Mela faces huge challenges to coexist with these influences. The Sangam is dedicated to nurturing and spreading the tradition of Bhagavata Mela so that it is vibrant enough to make its impact felt in the cultural ethos of today.

In its efforts to developing the tradition of Bhagavata Mela, the Sangam and its members face many challenges. All the dancers and other artistes are performing today against tremendous odds. Dancers, in particular, are not professionals and have other careers. The artistes face the powerful challenges of a modern society that is redefining education, entertainment and even spirituality by western customs and technology. However, for the performing artistes, this is the living connection with their Ishta Devata Lord Narasimha. It is their form of worship. They do it as service and surrender to the Lord. In fact, some

of the members of the Sangam have had to dig into their personal savings, when collections have gone short, to conduct the annual festival without a break.

In the run up to the festival, there are rehearsals for the performers. It is a unique experience being part of these sessions. All participants are male. There is warm camaraderie among them notwithstanding the ugly rows that crop up when sensitive artistes work together. Their artistry lies in their spontaneity and skills of improvisation. A nattuvanar (dance guru) to guide the dance, dancers, scholars to explain situations and clarify lyrics, musicians and a director work together as a team in shaping the play. There is a general atmosphere of indulgence. A missed step, a wrong note or a forgotten gesture is generously condoned. Nobody performs under pressure. The atmosphere is relaxed and one of a family, with a strong undercurrent of devotion. This is particularly manifest on the eve of Narasimha Jayanti, when *Prahlada Charitramu* is enacted. The life and the psyche of the Melattur village are irrevocably entwined with this myth. There are such enlightened audience who know the play backwards, know every song, every movement, every gesture and are steeped in the traditions of Bhagavata Mela.

Even a week before Narasimha Jayanti, the entire Melattur village is charged with devotional fervor. Many Vedic rituals and homams are conducted.They take place now at the new temple of Lord Lakshmi Narasimha on the west banks of the Narayana Theertha, whre an ancient temple of Narasimha existed but was lost to the ravages of time. The morning of Narasimha Jayanti in Melattur begins with ceremonies at Sri Varadaraja temple where the participants gather. Following the morning pujas, the priest ties a yellow thread on the wrists of the actors, binding them to their sacred duty. In the temple of Sri Varadaraja Swami, there is the sannidhi (altar) of Lord Lakshmi Narasimha (and also the idols of Lord Yoga Narasimha of the temple that once existed on the west banks of Narayana Theertha). In the sanctum sanctorum, a 500-year-old mask is kept in a cupboard. It is taken out at night to be worn by the actor performing the role of Lord

Narasimha. In the late evening around nine 'o clock, the villagers gather at the open-air marquee with the permanent auditorium adjacent to the Lord Lakshmi Narasimha temple on the west banks of the Narayana Theertha pond. The artistes move to the stage after worshipping at the Lakshmi Narasimha Swamitemple there. The mask is placed on a makeshift shrine at the far end, directly opposite the stage, where Lord Varadaraja is also seated as the divine guest. The performance starts with a long musical overture, after which a young actor wearing a Ganesha mask makes an appearance. Flowers, fruits and arati are offered to him. The performance follows the Sanskrit theatre tradition, wherein characters first appear in the introductory preludes, called Pravesha darus. Once the main characters are introduced, the first part of the play, namely the ***Purvarangam*** is complete. The story proper is part of the second act or the ***Uttararangam***. The music is chaste Carnatic music and the lucid lyrics in Telugu are composed in varying literary structures - couplets, dialogue, darus and so on.

As the climax approaches, the actor who is to portray Lord Narasimha dons the mask. He goes into a trance. He has observed strict austerities all day long. Yet when he dons the mask, he goes into uncontrollable fury. The taunting of the demon king infuriates him and at the appropriate moment he appears, roaring with anger and frenzy. It requires four stageheads to hold him back with sashes around his waist. An actual confrontation is avoided after an unfortunate event once led to violence on the stage. The audience is enthralled by this awesome creature. They believe that Lord Vishnu blesses their village by entering the body of this actor in spirit. The play ends with a benediction. Jaggery water (paanagam) and arati are offered to appease Lord Narasimha. The actors are taken in a procession to the temple. The mask is ceremoniously replaced and sprinkling water revives the actor. Another significant ritual is the celebration of marriage natakams like Seetha Kalyanam and Rukmini Kalyanam with genuine joy and distribution of sweets and other auspicious objects like betel leaves etc. Sometimes the participants perform the traditional Kummi dance.

Melattur Venkatarama Sastri and His Contributions

In the 17th and 18th centuries, many of the poets and artistes of the Thanjavur's Marathi kings' court lived in villages surrounding Thanjavur, including Melattur. Among them the most famous artiste is Melattur Venkatarama Sastri. His Bhagavata Mela dance dramas today stand testimony to the devotional fervor, musical depth, dramatic depictions and dance nuances of the tradition of Bhagavata Mela.

Whatever we know about Melattur Venkatarama Sastri is primarily from references in his own compositions. In the katha sangraha (story's summary) dvipadi (couplets) of his *Markandeya Charitramu,* Sastri describes the land he lived in as "Dhirudou Sri Shivaji Kshithipathi Thanayu Rajyambuna". From this, it becomes evident that he lived during the reign of King Shivaji (1833 – 1855 AD). Further, in the palm leaf manuscript of Sastri's dance drama *Harichandra* available with and preserved by Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam's Sri. Mahalingam (Mali), the date of its composition is indicated as Darala varusham, Avani Matham, 17th, Monday, which works out to 30th August 1824. Assuming he must have been at least 25 years old by then to have composed such a dance drama, one is able to assign a life span of 1800 to 1875 AD to Melattur Venkatarama Sastri. Further, in his work *Sangeetha Sampradaya Pradarshini,* Sri. Subbarama Dikshitar mentions that Melattur Venkatarama Sastri lived during the days of the kings Sarafoji and Shivaji. Yakshagana researcher Sri Joga Rao mentions that the old age of Sri Venkatarama Sastri was the youth of Sadguru Sri Thyagaraja Swami.

Melattur Venkatarama Sastri was born to Gopalakrishna Iyer and was tutored by Guru Lakshmana Iyer. He was a contemporary of the chief artiste of Bhagavata Mela in the Thanjavur palace Sri. Varahappaiya Dikshitar, Panchanatha Bhagavatar, and Sadguru Sri Thyagaraja Swami. Melattur Venkatarama Sastri was an upasaka of Lord Sri Lakshmi Narasimha.

Sri Venkatarama Sastri is known to have composed the following plays:

1. Prahlada Charitramu
2. Rukmini Kalyanam
3. Markandeya Charitramu
4. Usha Parinayamu
5. Harichandra
6. Seetha Kalyanamu
7. Parvathi Parinayamu
8. Kamsa Vadam (or) Krishna Leela
9. Harihara Leela Vilasam
10. Dhruva Charitramu

There are also claims that he is the author of *Rukmangada Charitramu*, though there is no evidence in the dance drama's katha sangraham (story summary, where the author declares himself and when, where and how the drama is being performed). Further, in the handwritten notes of the renowned Bhagavata Mela Guru *Padma Shri* Balu Bhagavatar, this dance drama is mentioned as "Sri Varahapuri vasastha Sri Narayana Theertha virakithamithi kechith vadanthi", which is further support to the statement that Sri Sastri did not author *Rukmangada Charitramu*.

Sri. Joga Rao also claims that Sri Sastri authored the drama *Shivarathri Vratha Charitramu*. The script of this drama was found in Melattur. However, the script has many portions missing, including in the Katha Sangraham section. Therefore, it is as yet impossible to ascertain the veracity of this claim. Sri. Joga Rao also claims hearsay evidence of the authorship of Sri Sastri of the dramas *Satsangaraja Charitramu, Asatsangaraja Charitramu* and *Jaganleela*, though there is no hard evidence as yet to establish this.Thus, one may conclude that today we have ten Bhagavata Mela dance dramas authored by Melattur Sri Venkatarama Sastri.

Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam

Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam (Regd. 8/64 and 56/87) was formed in 1964 to preserve, nurture, develop and spread the

unique artform of Bhagavata Mela, particularly the dance dramas of Melattur Venkatarama Sastri. Since then the Sangam and its members have dedicated all efforts towards this cause and have contributed significantly towards this noble cause.

Chief among the accomplishments of the sangam is the regular conduct of the Annual Bhagavata Mela Natya Natak Utsav from 1966 to date with the Divine Grace of Lord Lakshmi Narasimha. Even in the year 2000 when the entire stage and most of the costumes and sets prepared for the Utsav were destroyed due to a fire accident, the Utsav was staged within a month's time.

Bhagavata Mela tradition was preserved by the Bhagavatas who performed the dance dramas, mostly the ones authored by Melattur Sri Venkatarama Sastri, every year at their temples at villages such as Melattur, Oothukkadu, Thepperumanallur, Saliyamangalam, Soolamangalam and Mannargudi. Particularly during Narasimha Jayanti, *Prahlada Charitram* was performed. However, it is safe to say that in early 20th century, this tradition was heading towards decline due to:

- The insulation of the villages from cities and lack of recognition and patronage after the disappearance of royalty in South India
- Lack of resources, incentive, involvement and interest that started creeping in
- Lack of effective administrative leadership to liaise, correspond and organize the performance activities

In many of these villages, the performances stopped, sputtered and eventually the tradition vanished. In villages such as Melattur, Thepparumanallur and Saliyamangalam, they endured albeit with changes forced by necessities. *Bharatam* Natesa Iyer (1855 - 1931), who is now known as the Father of Bhagavata Mela, valiantly fought often insurmountable odds to continue the tradition in Melattur. Sri Natesa Iyer was a trained Bhagavata Mela artiste and was instrumental in conducting the annual festival with diligence. It is believed that all the ten plays of Venkatarama Sastri were in currency during his time.

However, to the best of our knowledge, only four plays seem to have been staged during his time - namely, *Prahlada Charitram, Harichandra, Usha Parinayam,* and *Markandeya.*Natesa Iyer also worked towards preserving the tradition of Bhagavata Mela by notating some of the plays of Venkatarama Sastri, which were handwritten by his daughter Kalyaniammal. He conducted the annual festival despite severe dearth of resources from 1928-1931.

The unexpected death of Natesa Iyer in 1931 unfortunately led to another disruption in the performances. The art form was then take up by the Telugu Brahmins of Melattur under the leadership of the village Munsif Melattur Sri. T. K. Subramania Iyer and the guidance of Nallur Narayanaswami Iyer, Nallur Pichu Bhagavatar, Kanakangi Josiyar, and Kinchin Kotandarama Iyer. They performed *Prahlada Charitram* from 1932 to 1941 in front of Lord Varadaraja Perumal temple at Melattur. This was the time when Sri. P. K. Subbaier, the disciple of *Sangeetha Kalanidhi* Ariyakudi Sri. Ramanuja Iyengar, started singing for Bhagavata Mela. In 1938, a second troupe led by Smartha Brahmins of Melattur also initiated Bhagavata Mela performances at the Lord Dhakshinamurthy Vinayagar temple at Melattur. On the occasion of Shivaratri, they staged *Markandeya.* They were led by Melattur Sri. V. Ganesa Iyer and the performances were conducted under the guidance of Sri. Balu Bhagavatar. In 1938, dialogues alone were rendered in Tamil whereas from 1939-1941, the entire performance was in Telugu.

In 1941, the Telugu Brahmins stopped their performances for reasons unknown. In 1942, Kunnam Srinivasa Iyer, Mirasdar, Melattur, advised and encouraged the Smartha Brahmin troupe to take up the performance of *Prahlada Charitram* in addition to their earlier repertoire. He also advised them to stage their natakams in front of Lord Varadaraja Swami temple, Melattur. He donated Rs. 100 to cover part of the expenses, and arranged for the pandal for the performances. Thus it came about that Bhagavata Mela natakams were conducted from 1942 by the Smartha Brahmins of Melattur in front of the Lord Varadaraja Swami temple. This troupe were under the guidance of

Sri.Balu Bhagavatar, with Balu Bhagavatar and Sri. P. K. Subbaier performing at the vocals along with Melattur Krishnamurthy Sarma and Melattur Ramani Iyer. This was the time when Sri. E. Krishnaier, Supreme Court Justice Sri. A. S. P. Iyer, Smt. M. S. Subbulakshmi and Sri. Sadasivam, and Vazhuvur Sri. Ramiah Pillai visited Melattur to see the Bhagavata Mela performances. Kanchi Maha Perivaya Jagadguru Shri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Swamigal honored Sri. Balu Bhagavatar with a gold thoda and all the other artistes with a gold coin each at Elayathankudi in 1962. At this time, Sri. T. K. S. Rajagopalan, famous for his female roles in Bhagavata Mela natakams, performed the patrapravesham of Leelavati and the mei in front of Mahaperiyaval. In all of these efforts, they were also supported by Smt. Kalyani Ammal, the daughter of *Bharatam* Natesa Iyer, whose notebooks formed the authentic sources of the natakams, and whose thorough knowledge of the traditions was relied upon.

In 1964, a few major changes came about. First, it was realized that there existed no organization or a banner under which these performances were being conducted. Sri. V. D. Swamy, the famous industrialist from Melattur, took the leadership of forming the first organization which would be dedicated to the fostering of this art form, in addition to organizing the annual Narasimha Jayanti performances. This organization was aptly named *Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam*, reflecting its broad goals of fostering the art form, teaching and spreading it to the youth, and becoming a knowledge and resource center for Bhagavata Mela and other temple theater, music, and dance forms.Sri.Swamy had the vision to take this art form out of Melattur and into the mainstream, and showcase it as one of the few remaining live links to our culture, a torchbearer of traditions laid down in Bharata Muni's Natya Shastra. He dreamt of Melattur becoming a seat of cultural heritage of India, where traditional art forms including Bhagavata Mela were practiced, taught, learned, and performed. He wanted these annual festivals to become the seeds for the fruits of continuous teaching, learning, practicing, and performing rather than the annual ritual of preservation of an art form. A person of no less stature than the renowned Justice Venkatarama Iyer headed

the Sangam. All the major artistes of the time, including Sri. P. K. Subbaier, Sri. Balu Bhagavatar, andSri. G. Swaminathan and Sri. V. Ganesa Iyer and Sri. K. Ramalinga Iyer were founding members of the Sangam. Other founding members include Sri. V. Naganatha Iyer, Sri. R. Sethuraman, Sri. A. R. Sethuraman, and Sri. N. Venkataraman (Thambu).

Sri.Swamy bought a piece of land near the Narayana Theertham, the pond on the west end of Melattur village, on whose banks a temple stood for Lord Narasimha Swami of Melattur. This temple had been lost in the vagaries of time, and two moola vigrahas of the Lord Narasimha (made at different times in the distant past) are now installed and worshipped in the Lord Varadaraja Swami temple at Melattur. The spacious land was to be put to immediate and regular use for conducting the annual Bhagavata Mela utsavams. Three natakams were to be performed during the utsavam that year – *Prahlada Charitram*, *Harichandra*, and *Usha Parinayam*. The first two natakams were indeed performed. Unfortunately, due to the death of the then Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the utsavam was stopped and *Usha Parinayam* was not performed.

Unfortunately, in 1965, the lead dancers of the Sangam namely, Sri. G. Swaminathan, Sri. S. Natarajan, Piswati Sri. R. Sundaram, and Sri. R. Ganesan, under the leadership of Sri. V. Ganesa Iyer separated from the Sangam and started staging their performances in front of Lord Varadaraja Swami temple. The vocalists Melattur Sri. Krishnamurthy Sarma and Melattur Sri. Ramani Iyer joined them. Hoping for a reconciliation, the Sangam itself did not conduct any performances in 1965 on the occasion of Narasimha Jayanti. When the hopes of reconciliation appeared bleak, the Sangam started staging performances at its land on the banks of Narayana Theertham from 1966 during Narasimha Jayanti. It is to be noted that Sri. Balu Bhagavatar, Sri. P. K. Subbaier, and Smt. Kalyani Ammal stayed affiliated with the Sangam till the end of their lives. Sri. V. D. Swamy, the founding Trustee of the Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam,

stayed on as the Trustee and President of the Sangam and fully supported the Sangam and its activities till the end of his life.

Contributions of Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam

Ever since its inception, Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam has worked tirelessly to nurture and spread Bhagavata Mela and its traditions. The first and foremost contribution of the Sangam in its efforts to foster this unique art form is the performances of Bhagavata Mela:

- Every year since 1966, there has been an Annual Bhagavata Mela Natya Natak Utsav at Melattur, Thanjavur District, around the time of Narasimha Jayanti in which *Prahlada Charitramu* of Melattur Venkatarama Sastri is performed along with a few other Bhagavata Mela dance dramas.
- Performances outside Melattur on a regular basis to popularize Bhagavata Mela:
    - ❖ Performances in Chennai at many prestigious venues including Music Academy, Krishna Gana Sabha, Brahma Gana Sabha, Kalakshetra, Mylapore Kapaliswara Temple, and many more
    - ❖ Performances in various places in Tamil Nadu, including Kanchipuram, Tiruvaiyaru and Tiruchirappalli
    - ❖ Performances outside Tamil Nadu, through the South Zone Cultural Centre, Thanjavur, including at Trivandrum, Hyderabad and Kurukshetra, at Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi, and at prestigious venues in Pune and Mumbai

In addition, the Sangam has contributed to the development of this art in the form of literary, artistic/dramatic, musical and dance-related contributions.

Literary Contributions

The Sangam is in possession of the original palm leaf manuscript of the dance drama *Harichandra* by Melattur Venkatarama Sastri, which it preserves carefully. It also has in its possession the handwritten notes of Kalyaniammal and her father Natesa Iyer, an

authentic reference to the musical, dance and dramatic traditions of Bhagavata Mela. The Sangam has published the text of the dance drama *Markandeya* composed by Melattur Venkatarama Sastri in 1995 with meaning and commentary. Further, the artists of Sangam, Sri. N. Viswanathan and Sri. *Bharatam* N. Srinivasan have published through Saraswati Mahal Library, the dance drama *Seetha Kalyanam* composed by Melattur Venkatarama Sastri with meaning, ragas as mentioned in the script and essays on the traditions of Bhagavata Mela. These authors have also published the dance drama *Nouka Charitramu* by Sadguru Sri Thyagaraja through the Saraswati Mahal Library. The Sangam has released two journals exclusively on Bhagavata Mela, one in 1994 and another in 2002, both with essays analyzing various aspects of the tradition. It has also contributed to the exclusive issue on Bhagavata Mela by the magazine *Sruthi* in 1994.

Artistic/Dramatic Contributions

Rukmini Kalyanam, the Telugu dance drama by Melattur Venkatarama Sastri, is preserved as written by Sastri and performed only by the Sangam as of now. In addition to performing Bhagavata Mela dance dramas of Melattur Venkatarama Sastri, the Sangam artistes have composed (music) and choreographed three other dance dramas - *Sakuntalam*, a Marathi dance drama in Bhagavata Mela tradition written by Maharaja Ekoji II (1696 - 1737), one of the Maratha kings of Thanjavur, *Sri Andal Thirukkalyanam* and *Geetodayam*,two Tamil dance dramas in the Bhagavata Mela tradition. A number of presentations have been given by the artistes of the Sangam on the dramatic aspects, costumes, make up and presentation of the tradition in venues of renown.

Musical Contributions

Bhagavata Mela dance dramas are renowned for their strong musical content. A number of major and rare ragas are employed in unique fashion, preserving the prayogas of the yore in the performance of the ragas. Ragas such as Ananda Bhairavi, Bhairavi, Devagandhari, Ahiri, Paras, Atana and Chenchurutti are presented with embellishments and occasional rare prayogas not heard in current

renditions, yet capturing their grandeur. Rare ragas such as Ghanta, Manji and Kumba Kambodhi are handled in detail and have phrases that are currently not in vogue. Every effort is made by the musicians and the artistes of the Sangam to preserve this unique musical identity of the tradition. The artistes have given several lecture demonstrations on the musical aspects of Bhagavata Mela in august gatherings including the MadrasMusicAcademy.

Dance Contributions

Next to the regular performances being conducted to spread Bhagavata Mela, the greatest contribution of the Sangam is its training of a number of young artists who are poised to carry on the tradition. Towards this end, the Sangam has organized workshops on Bhagavata Mela, including one sponsored by the Akademi. A new generation of dancers is now donning key roles, especially the male and female lead roles in all the dance dramas performed by the Sangam. All the dancers are trained in traditional Bharatanatyam as well as the unique footwork employed in Bhagavata Mela. They are also taught aspects of choreography and nattuvangam. It is the goal of the Sangam that this rare art form not become merely a family heirloom but become a thriving art form performed by many experts across the globe.

***Bharatam* Award**

In order to recognize the yeoman contributions of artistes to the preservation and development of Bhagavata Mela, Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam has instituted the award ***Bharatam***. The award carries a citation and a ponnadai.

Timeline of Bhagavata Mela & Its Evolution

***Bharatam* R. Mahalingam and Dr. Murali Rangarajan**

15th Century

Earliest Known Record of Bhagavata Mela Performance(1432: Vipranarayana Charitram)

15th-18th Centuries

Many Bhagavata Mela natakams are composed and performed in many places in and around Thanjavur, under the patronage of Nayak Cholas and Marathi Cholas.

18th-19th Century: Bhagavata Mela Compositions of Melattur Venkatarama Sastri

Melattur Venkatarama Sastri composes ten Natya Natakams, which form the basis of today's Bhagavata Mela performances.

1928-1931: Revival of Bhagavata Mela by *Bharatam* Natesa Iyer

Bharatam Natesa Iyer revives, in 1928,the performances of Sastri's Bhagavata Mela Natakams that had been stopped due to hardship and lack of leadership.

***Bharatam* Natesa Iyer**

Banner Organization: None

Leadership: *Bharatam* Natesa Iyer

Guidance: *Bharatam* Natesa Iyer

Premises: Lord Varadaraja Perumal Temple, Melattur

Occasion: Narasimha Jayanti

Natakam: *Prahlada Charitram*

Troupe:

Hiranyakashipu: Melattur Ramani Iyer

Leelavati: *Bharatam* Natesa Iyer (1928); Kinchin Kotandarama Iyer (1929-1931)

Prahlada: Melattur *John* Narayanaswami Iyer

Vocalists: Unknown

Other Plays Staged during 1928-1931: *Harischandra, Usha Parinayam, Markandeya*

Reasons for Discontinuation: *Bharatam* Natesa Iyer passes away in 1931

1932-1941: Telugu Brahmins of Melattur

Banner Organization: None
Leadership: Village Munsif Melattur T. K. Subramania Iyer
Guidance: Nallur Narayanaswami Iyer, Nallur Pichu Bhagavatar, Kanakangi Josiyar, Kinchin Kotandarama Iyer
Premises: Lord Varadaraja Perumal Temple, Melattur
Occasion: Narasimha Jayanti
Natakam: *Prahlada Charitram*
Troupe:
Hiranyakashipu: Melattur Ramani Iyer (1932); G. V. Ramaswami Iyer (1933-1941), known for his commanding stage presence, charisma, and excellent dialogue delivery
Leelavati: Head Constable Gopalakrishna Iyer (1932-1934); T. K. S. Rajagopalan (1935-1941), trained for sthri part by danceusse Thanjavur Kamalamba Ammal
Prahlada: T. K. S. Rajagopalan (1932-1934); T. K. S. Gangadharan (a) Pappa
Narasimha Swami: Melattur G. V. Narayanaswami Iyer

Vocalists:
Melattur Gopala Iyer, Melattur Harihi Ganesa Iyer, *Kalaimamani* P. K. Subbaier, C. V. Muthuswamy Iyer (Sutradharar)

Reasons for discontinuation: Not known

1938-1941: Brahmins of Melattur

From 1938, Bhagavata Mela performances were initiated by a second troupe at Melattur. In 1938, the performance was conducted with dialogues in Tamil and the darus in Telugu. From 1939 onwards, the entire performance was in Telugu.

Banner Organization: None

Leadership: Melattur V. Ganesa Iyer

Guidance: *Padma Shri* Balu Bhagavatar

Premises: Lord Dhakshinamurthy Vinayagar Temple, Melattur

Occasion: Shivaratri

Natakam: *Markandeya*

Troupe:

Mrikandu: Melattur Krishnamurthy Sarma (Part I), Poondi Kittu Gurukkal (Part II)

Marudhvati: Maligaithidal Krishnamurthy (Part I), Seenu Josyar (Part II)

Markandeya: N. Venkatarama Iyer (a) Thambu (Part I), S. Nagarajan (a) Nagu (Part II)

Yaman: G. Swaminathan

Paramashivan: Piswati R. Sundaram

Other plays staged during 1939-1941: *Usha Parinayam, Rukmangada* (not a composition of Melattur Venkatarama Sastry)

Vocalists:

Melattur Gopala Iyer, Melattur B. L. Manickam Iyer, Melattur Ramani Iyer, Balu Bhagavatar

1942-1963: Brahmins of Melattur

Since the Telugu Brahmins troupe stopped performances in 1941, those interested in continuing performances merged with the second troupe.

Banner Organization: None

Leadership: Melattur V. Ganesa Iyer; (In the year 1942, Kunnam Srinivasa Iyer, Mirasdar, Melattur,encouraged the artists to take up *Prahlada Charitram* in addition to the other natakamsthat they were performing from 1938. He advised them to stage their natakams in front of Lord Varadaraja Swami Temple, Melattur, since the other troupe had discontinued its performances there. To this end, he donated Rs. 100 in 1942 to these artists to cover part of the expenses, and arranged for the pandal for the performances.)

Guidance: *Padma Shri* Balu Bhagavatar

Premises: Lord Varadaraja Swami Temple, Melattur

Occasion: Narasimha Jayanti

Natakams: *Prahlada Charitram, Harischandra* (started in 1953), *Usha Parinayam, Markandeya, Rukmangada*

Troupe:

Prahlada Charitram

Hiranyakashipu:G. Swaminathan

Leelavati:Melattur Nagarajan (Nagu); S. Natarajan

Prahlada: Melattur R. Ganesan

Narasimha Swami: Piswati Ramamurthy Iyer and Piswati R. Sundaram

Harichandra

Harichandra: G. Swaminathan

Chandramati: N. Venkatarama Iyer (a) Thambu (1953-1956); S. Natarajan (1957-1963)

Lohidasan: Melattur R. Ganesan

Vocalists:

Balu Bhagavatar, P. K. Subbaier, Melattur Krishnamurthy Sarma, Melattur Ramani Iyer

Key Incidents:

1950: E. Krishnaier visits Melattur and watches the natakams. He is highly impressed with the performances and takes it upon himself to popularize the existence of Bhagavata Mela and bring it out of Melattur

1953: *Harichandra* natakam arangetram

1953: *Hindu* Raghunathan and E. Krishnaier visit Melattur and watch the natakams.
1954: Supreme Court Judge A. S. P. Iyer visits Melattur and watches the natakams.
1955: Smt. M. S. Subbulakshmi, Sri. Sadasivam, and Vazhuvur Ramiah Pillai visit Melattur and watch *Harichandra*.
1962: The performance of *Prahlada Charitram* takes place in the divine sannidhanam of Kanchi Mahaperiyaval Jagadguru Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swamigal at Elayathangudi.Balu Bhagavatar is honored with a gold thoda and all the artists are honored with a gold coin. At this time, Sri. T. K. S. Rajagopalan, the famed dancer of sthri parts in Bhagavata Mela, performs the patra pravesham of Leelavati and mei (alarippu) before Mahaperiyaval.

1964: Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam

Banner Organization: Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam
Leadership: Melattur Sri. V. D. Swamy, Industrialist
Guidance: *Padma Shri* Balu Bhagavatar
Premises: Own land and temporary auditorium of the Sangam, bought and constructed by Sri. V. D. Swamy for the purpose of regular staging of natakams, at the west end of the village, near Narayana Theertham tank; This is where the ancient temple of Lord Narsimha existed as related by the villagers. Two of the Narasimha vigrahas (of different times) from the ancient temple are now installed at Lord Varadaraja Swami temple.
Occasion: Narasimha Jayanti
Natakams: *Prahlada Charitram, Harichandra* (*Usha Parinayam*, planned on 27th May 1964, was stopped due to the passing away of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Honorable Prime Minister of India.)
Troupe:
Prahlada Charitram
Hiranyakashipu: G. Swaminathan
Leelavati: S. Natarajan
Prahlada: Melattur R. Ganesan

Narasimha Swami: Piswati R. Sundaram

Harichandra
Harichandra: G. Swaminathan
Leelavati: N. Venkatarama Iyer (a) Thambu (Part – I); S. Natarajan (Part – II)
Lohidasan: Melattur R. Ganesan

Vocalists:
Balu Bhagavatar, P. K. Subbaier, Thanjavur Sankara Iyer, L. Venkatesa Iyengar, Melattur Krishnamurthy Sarma, Melattur Ramani Iyer

1965: Split in Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam

The lead dance artists of Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam, namely, G. Swaminathan, S. Natarajan, Piswati R. Sundaram, and R. Ganesan, along with V. Ganesa Iyer separate from the Sangam and start staging their performances in front of Lord Varadaraja Swami temple.Melattur Krishnamurthy Sarma and Melattur Ramani Iyer join them, while Balu Bhagavatar, P. K. Subbaier, and Smt. Kalyani Ammal, daughter of *Bharatam* Natesa Iyer stay affiliated with the Sangam till the end of their lives. Sri. V. D. Swamy, the founding Trustee of the Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam, stays on as the Trustee and President of the Sangam and fully supports the Sangam and its activities till the end of his life. In hopes of reconciliation, Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam does not stage any performance during Narasimha Jayanti this year.

1965: *Prahlada Charitram* published by Madras Music Academy

The Natya Natakam *Prahlada Charitram*of Melattur Venkatarama Sastri is published by Madras Music Academy.

1966-Present: Performances of
Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam

Banner Organization: Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam

Leadership: Melattur Sri. V. D. Swamy, Industrialist
Guidance: *Padma Shri* Balu Bhagavatar
Premises: Own land of the Sangam
Occasion: Narasimha Jayanti
Natakam: *Prahlada Charitram*
Troupe:
Year: 1966
Prahlada Charitram
Hiranyakashipu: G. V. R. Venkataraman (Part – I), P. Venugopal (Part – II)
Leelavati: N. Venkataraman (a) Thambu
Prahlada: S. Venkataraman (a) Ramanan (Part – I), R. Mahalingam (a) Mali (Part – II)
Narasimha Swami: G. V. Narayanaswami Iyer

After 1966:
Prahlada Charitram
Hiranyakashipu: S. Santhanaraman, Sirukkur V. Srinivasan, V. Baskar,M. Jayashankar, R. Mahalingam (a) Mali (1990-), S. Gobi, M. Swaminathan, S. Aravind
Leelavati: R. Mahalingam (a) Mali (1967-1988), S. Nagarajan (1989-present)
Prahlada: G. V. R. Chandramouli, K. Srikanth,S. Nagarajan, G. Sriram, G. Ashok,M. Swaminathan, S. Aravind, S. Anand, B. Soorya, Adarsh Venkat
Narasimha Swami: P. Ramaswami, S. Gopalakrishnan, S. Gobi
Sukracharya: G. Subramaniam, P. Ramaswami, K. Arunachalam

Harichandra
Harichandra: P. Venugopal, N. Venkataraman (a) Thambu, M. Jayashankar, R. Mahalingam (a) Mali, S. Nagarajan
Chandramati: R. Mahalingam (a) Mali, S. Nagarajan, S. Gobi, S. Anand
Nakshatrayan: S. Gopalakrishnan, S. Aravind
Vishwamitrar: P. Ramaswami
Vasishtar: V. Chandramouli, K. Arunachalam

Vocalists:

Balu Bhagavatar, P. K. Subbaier, Gopu Iyengar, Thanjavur Sankara Iyer, L. Venkatesa Iyengar, S. Radhakrishnan, K. Sivasubramaniam, Thanjavur Kalyana Bhagavatar and Brothers, Trichy N. Natarajan, N. Srinivasan, Neyveli Pattabhi, Sitalapati Balasubramanian, Mannargudi Muthuraman, Thirukkodikkaval P. S. Subramania Iyer (a) Pappa, Mayavaram Venkatesh, G. Kaliyamurthy, Murali Rangarajan, P. Devnath, Thanjavur Raja, Nirmal Harish

Nattuvangam:

Balu Bhagavatar, K. G. Kittappa Pillai, T. G. Bavu Pillai, B. Herambanathan, B. Jayabharathi, V. Srinivasan, H. Hariharan

1994: First Journal exclusively on Bhagavata Mela released by the Sangam

The Sangam publishes its first publication, a journal exclusively dedicated to Bhagavata Mela.

1995: *Markandeya* published by the Sangam

The Natya Natakam *Markandeya* of Melattur Venkatarama Sastri was published by Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam.

2000: Trial by fire

On 16th May 2000, due to an unfortunate fire accident, the entire set and almost the entire costumes of the Sangam are destroyed. By the Grace of Lord Lakshmi Narasimha and generous support of many patrons, the Utsavam is staged within a month.

2001-Present

Regular performances by Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam are conducted outside Melattur in many places, including in December Season in Chennai – more than 60 so far.

2002: Journal exclusively on Bhagavata Mela released by the Sangam

2002: Journal exclusively on Bhagavata Mela released by the Sangam

The Sangam publishes a second journal exclusively dedicated to Bhagavata Mela.

2010: Lakshmi Narasimha Swami Temple and Auditorium

The Sangam constructs and consecrates a new temple for Lord Lakshmi Narasimha on the place where the lost ancient temple stood. The Sangam also constructs a new permanent auditorium (*Dr.ShriNalliAuditorium*) for performance of temple theater arts.

2012: Utsava Murthy

The Sangam installs autsava vigraham of Lord Lakshmi Narasimha in the temple.

Bhagavata Mela

Kalaimamani **Dr. B. M. Sundaram**

Bhagavata Mela is the name of dance dramas enacted every year by male members of the Brahmin community in some villages of Thanjavur district, during certain festivals. The term 'Bhagavata' literally means, 'a devotee of Vishnu, Holy, Divine, one dedicated to religious services pertaining to Sri Vaishnavism, in particular' and so on. A 'Bhagavata' need not be a Brahmin, by birth. "Sudrascha Bhagavadbhakta Vipra Bhagavata smrta:" The earliest Telugu Vachana composer, Chaturlaksham Krishnamacharya (13th century) very clearly states, "E Varamainemi?" and addresses Narayanayya, Chennamayyanagar and others from Potakamur and hailing from different communities as "Potakamuri Bhagavatulu". 'Mela'means 'a group, an assembly, union', etc. So, Bhagavata Mela here conveys the meaning 'a group or troupe of persons who sings and enact a dance – drama'. This dance - drama is staged on the Narasimha Jayanti day year, which falls on the 14th day of the bright fortnight of the month, vaisakha, generally in between late May and early June, according to the Roman calendar. Some mythical aeons ago, it was on this day, Vishnu took up his fourth incarnation- Narsimha – the lion - man, to save his devotee, Prahlada form his demon - father, Hiranyakasipu. On that night, the dance-drama, Prahlada Charitram is staged. Some opine that the influence of those who migrated from Ahobalam, is the cause for these people to take up Narasimha cult for worship. The idol of Lord Lakshmi Narasimha in Melattur dates between 11th and 12th centuries and hence, it may be rightly stated that Narasimha cult was very much in existence even during the Chola times. This dance-drama was a regular feature in five villages, namely, Melattur, Saliyamangalam, Teeperumalnallur, Oottukkadu and Soolamangalam. From the Thanjavur Palace records, preserved in the Modi manuscripts, we get a number of detailsabout this. Some examples : 1. Manuscript dated 1869=Materials given to perform 'Rukmini Kalyana', a Bhagavata Mela on the Gokulashtami day; 2. Dated 1821= List of materials supplied to present Ganesa Leelarnavam, a Bhagavata Mela

in front of Sri Pratapa Ramasvami; 3. Dated 1786 = Land Grant in Mannargudi given to artistes, who perform Bhagavata Mela there; 4. Dated 1832 = Bhagavata Melam Guruvayya Narayabayya and Gopalbai Raja were fined for not appearing in the dance- drama with all 'make-up'; 5. An inam document dated 30.12.1735 narrates that a village called Eka Maharajapuram was granted to the Brahmins, one among them being Giriraja Kavi of the Bhagavata Mela family, the donor being Sujan Bai, consort of Bavaji(Ekoji II). Thre are many more, which make clear that Bhagavata Mela was performed inside the palace or at some other places like Mannargudi. King Vijayaraghava Nayaka's 'Prahlada' was staged in the Narasimha Temple, situated in the East gate (Kondirajapalayam) of Thanjavur. He also caused to enact his ' Rukmini Kalyanam' and some others at Mannargudi Tirumalamba, second wife of King Achyutaraya of Vijayanagar is said to have come to Tamilnadu in 1530, composed a dance-drama, "Bhakta Sanjeevi" and arranged to stage it in front of Lord Sree Ranganatha and presented the actors a village called 'Anilai' (A R E .308 of 1950-51).

In the present times, a week - long celebration of this festival is conducted only in Melattur, for three days in Saliyamangalam and for one day in Tepperumalnallur, while it is completely defunct in all other villages.

Barring Melattur, other important persons, who were instrumental in regularly staging the Bhagavata Mela dramas were Sami Bhagavatar, P.R.Krishnamurthi and Mahadeva Lyer alias Kitta (Oottukkadu- Dhenuvasapuram is its Sanskrit name), Panchandayya, Sunderesa Lyer and S. Srinivasan (Saliyamangalam), Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar and Seetarama Bhagavatar (Soolamangalam), Bharatam Narayanasvami Lyer (Nallur - 1872/1953) and Natesa Bhagavatar, Govinda Bhagavatar, Anantakrishna Bhagavatar, Subbayya Bhagavatar, Narada Bhagavatar and Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar(Tepperumalnallur). Today, its organizers are Kannan and Bhaskar, sons of 'Maideen' Venkatarama Lyer. Tepperumalnallur people say that after his expulsion from Melattur, Venkatarama Sastri lived in this village for

some years and composed dramas afresh. They are :-

1. Rugumangada.
2. Ambareesha Charitram,
3. Prahlada,
4. Usha Parinayam,
5. Krishnavatara,
6. Devaki Kalyanam
7. Rukmini Kalyanam and
8. Kamsa Vadham.

On the Ekadasi day, following Sri Rama Navami , ' Rugmangada' was regularly staged and 'Ambareesha Charitram' on the Dvadasi day, under the banner, "Pracheena Sampradaya Nataka Manram". Curiously, boys from the Brudcharanam sect were only made eligible to take part in these dance-dramas, nobody knows why!

It must be pointed out here that Nagalakshmi, a descendant of the famous composer, Venkatasubba Lyer wrote a 'Nataka Odam', which gives the names of plays staged in Oottukkadu village,. They are: Rukamngada (the first play to be staged in this village), Parvati Kalyanam, Prahlada, Golla Katha, Markandeya, Parijata Charitram, Kamsa vadham and Rukmini Kalyanam. According to reliable sources the Bhagavata Mela tradition in Oottukkadu dates back five centuries and was regularly presented until 1946.Now, let us see about the Bhagavata Mela of Melattur.

Melattur village is situated about 12 miles north - east of Thanjavur town. Someone, while writing about this dance-drama, mentioned that this village acquired the name from the mixture of two words:- 'Melattu' (meaning, of the dancing and singing troupe) and 'Oor' (a place). So, that writer imagined 'Melattu + Oor' made 'Melattur'. The inscriptions of King Vikrama Chola, Rajaraja Chola I and Rajaditya Chola inform us that the empire was divided into different Nadus and this particular territory was called 'Nittavinoda Valanattup Peru Milattoor'. So, even during the Chola times this village had the name,

Melattoor. There is also a corrupt usage - Merattoor! This village and many more in the periphery were mainly inhabited by Telugu people.

After the death of the Eastern Chalukya King, Danarnava in 972, his sons with their families and retinue migrated to the Chola country and settled down in Thiruvaiyaru, the village sanctified by the samadhi of Sri Tyagaraja,the greatest among the Carnatic Music Trinity, while some others in the nearby villages. Even after the restoration of their native land – the Vengi Kingdom – to the sons of Danarnava, the people chose to stay back only in the Kaveri delta. Thus Telugu became the dialect of this territory, including Melattur.

There is an interesting story connected with the Nayak ruler of Thanjavur and Melattoor. On one occasion, King Achyutappa Nayaka took the Tamboolam (betal leaves and areca nuts) from his Adapam (one who holds the betel box) with his left hand and started to chew. Though done inadvertently, it amounted to a sin and to ward off its constraining consequences, he gave away the entire village of Melattur to persons arrived from Pisupati, a village in the then Nellore Mandala. Since then this village came to be known as Uttamadanapuram or Achyutabdhi or Achyutapuri. But according to the palace documents,Achyutapuri consists of some other villages, besides Melattur. The original endowment of Achyutappa Nayaka consisted of 510 shares, out of which 500 were given to Brahmins. Besides one and half acres of fertile land, one house with a well, was endowed to each Brahmin. At the western end of the northern Brahmin street a temple for Varadaraja Temple was constructed later. According to Natarajan, the leader of one Bhagavata Mela trupe, this temple was constructed during the Maratha ruler, Pratapasimha's period (1739/1763), but archaeologists ascribe it to the Chola times. After some time, an idol of Lord Narasimha was also installed in this temple. This was probably done due to the direct influence and instructions of Narayana Teertha, a devotee of Narasimha and who composed his Krishna Leela Tarangini in this village. It is also believed that his work Parijatapaharanam was enacted as Bhagavata Mela here. The presiding

deity of Melattur is Unnatapureesa or Mudandeesa and the Goddess is Sivapriya.

Nataka prabandhas or epic plays were very popular from the times of the Nayaka kings of Tanjavur. Yajnyanarayana Deekshita, the minister of King Raghunatha Nayaka (1600/1630) wrote Raghunatha Vilasa Natakam while the king himself composed three operas: Gajendra Moksham, Rukmini Krishna Vivaham and Janaki Parinayam. Maha natakams in Telugu came to be written during the times of King Vijayaraghava Nayaka. (1633-1675). Out of his 57 works from the performing arts, 12 were operas. Only in his Prahlada Natakam, the character "Katikam" (Kattiyakkaran, the mace holder) was first introduced. No wonder 12 other Prahalada Natakams were written by different authors after Vijayaraghava's own reached the stage. The Maratha ruler, Shahji (1683/1712) composed 22 Yakshaganas and it was only he, who introduced the entry of Vinayaka, immediately after singing the Toadaya Mangalam.

The format of Melattur plays conformed to the patterns of Tanjavur court plays, but their authors added their own innovations. For instance, the initial entry of the Konangi and his comic dance.Konangi in Telugu means a buffoon or a soft fool in a farce. According to the traditional legend, Vinyaka swallowed the disc of Vishnu and to get back his missile, Vishnu transformed himself into a Konangi and performed a funny dance in front of the elephant-faced God. As the Story goes, the latter laughed a lot and the disc fell out. In olden days, the Konangi of Melattur palys was a dwarf since the Pravesa daru (the entry song) describes him such. This mountebank, today seems to be an absurdity. He serves no purpose really, except moving from one end of the stage to the other, at times shouting 'Saddu, Saddu'(Silence, Silence). He dances holding, with both his hands, a rope or a long scarf with a conical hat, like that of a buffoon. The Patra-pravesa Daru that accompanies the Konangi's act is worse than absurd. It has words like, "Mooshika Vahana Konangi"."Vaman roopa Konangi" and such like. Some sing it in the Mela as "Mooshaka Vahana"! Dr.Arudra explained that these lines only denote Vinayaka.

But, it is not known what is the connection between these words or Vinayaka, for that matter Konangi! In Oottukadu, according to Prof.P.Sambamurthi, the right to appear in the role of Konangi was once mortgaged! Some decades ago, in Melattur, after Todaya Mangalam, all actors would retire to their homes, asking the urchins sitting there to do some comic or mimicry, have some milk, take rest for sometime and then come back to begin the actual drama.

When we speak of the dance dramas of Melattur, the father of them, as we could say definitely comes to the fore. It was Melattur Venkatarama Sastri (1743/1809), a senior contemporary of Sri Tyagaraja. Even his father, Gopalakrishna Sastri wrote, acted and conducted some plays like Dhruva, Gowri, Rukmini Kalyanam and Seeta Kalyanam. He might have been a very young disciple of Narayana Teertha and received initiation into the Narasimha cult. Gopalakrishna Sastri's father, was Lakshmanarya of Sreevatsa Gotra. Venkatarama Sastri is said to have composed twelve dance-dramas, though there is no recorded evidence to assert this. The twelve are: Prahlada. Rugmangada, Markandeya, Usha Parinayam, Harischandra, Seeta Kalyanam, Rukmini Kalyanam, Kamsa Charitram, Sivaratri Natakam, Jagalleela Natakam, Satsangharaja Charitram and Asatsangharaja Charitram. Another author replaces the last two with Dhruva Charitram and Parvati Kalyanam. Venkatarama Sastri, a widower, is said to have had an illicit relationship with a widow which caused his expulsion from the village. After staying in some villages like Tepperumalnallur, Sastri migrated to Kuzhikkarai, where he died.

Perhaps after a lull for some years, Melattur Bhagavata Mela dance-dramas were invigorated and enlivened by the efforts of Bharatam Natesa Iyer of Melattur (1875/31.5.1931). He took active interest in these dramas and recruited boys of the village and started coaching them. He was an expert in doing Harikatha Kalakshepams and the great Padmasani Bai was his disciple. He also coached Kumbakonam B.S.Lalita Bai in that art. Some of the students of Natesa Iyer was greatly helped by Thanjavur Sabhapathi Nattuvanar, a descendant of the Tanjavur Quartet in choreography. Still later,

Tanjavur Kittappa Pillai, a doyen in the field of Bharatanatyam and another descendant of the Quartet has also choreographed some items for this drama. Natesa Iyer's student, Narayanasvami Iyer knew by memory all songs of all the dance-dramas. Natesa Iyer moved over to Chennai in1930 and passed away there, next year.

The Bhagavata Mela tradition, guided by Venkataramani and Venkatarama Josyar continued with the untiring efforts of Balu Bhagavatar (1897/4.11.1985). Ramani Iyer, Ganesa Iyer, P.K. Subba Iyer and some others formed a troupe in 1938 and staged Markandeya at the Vinayaka temple, with the initial help from Kinjin Kodandarama Iyer decided to stage all the plays (inclusive of Prahlada) in front of Varadaraja Perumal temple and did so. It is said that all the melas were performed in front of the Lakshmi Narasimha temple, located near the tank, known as Narayana Teertham, until this temple fell into despair. The idol of Narasimha was also shifted to the Varadaraja Temple. Balu Bhagvatar might not have been a great practical exponent of Bharatam, but it is learnt from reliable other sources that he was adept enough to coach others in Bhagavata Mela. Many Melattur residents aver that Mahalingam and Natarajan (the leaders of the present day two troupes in the same village) were trained by Balu Bhagavatar and that he was a great Sanskrit scholar. Natarajan says, "He did not learn Bharatam and on the Nrutta side, he was a zero". However, indeed, after Natesa Iyer, only he is revered by all. His Holiness the Paramacharya of Kanchi Mutt conferred upon Balu Bhagavatar the title 'Bhagavata Natana Sikhamani'. The Central Sanget Natak Akademi presented its award to him in 1967. The President of India decorated him with the 'Padmashree' award in 1973. It was only Balu Bhagavatar, who wrote the dialogues for 13 Bhagavata Mela dramas in Telugu and Sanskrit depending upon the requirement. In 1970, he introduced the Bhagavata Mela natakam, Dhruva Charitram to Kalakshetra and staged it there. Later, Kalyani Ammal, daughter of Bharatam Natesa Iyer donated all the Bhagavata Mela drama manuscripts, preserved by her father to Rukminidevi of Kalakshetra.

The mask to be worn by the person, who dons the role of Narasimha is very sacred to all of the Bhagavata Mela actors, irrespective of the village. The one in Melattur is said to have been worshipped by Venkatarama Sastri. Only on the Narasimha Jayanti day it is brought out and on other days it is kept in the Varadaraja Temple. But in other Bhagavata Mela villages it is preserved in the house of someone connected with the drama. We may recollect here, the poet Ottakkoottar has referred to this as 'Mukha Panai' in his Takka Yagap Parani.

According to Natarajan of one Bhagavata Mela troupe, Rukmini Kalyanam enacted by this troupe is of Venkatarama Sastri only. But the style of the Darus, the words employed and so on in this version of 'Rukmini Kalyanama' raise doubts whether Venkatarama Sastri was the author. For instance, "Veeradu, Navaneeta Chorudu, Vijayagopaludu koluvaiyunnadey ...... Narada Muni mukhyulu naamamu sayaga Narayana Teertha nathudu" ---- these are the words of Narayana Teertha adoring Vijayagopala. This suggests that perhaps 'Rukmini Kalyanam' has been virtually based on or at least partially adapted from a work of Narayana Teertha or of a Nayak composer. The Sandhi Vachanas recited in the Melattur Bhagavata Mela dramas are typically in the same mould of Narayana Teertha. E.g.:- "Aura ee vidhambuna .... antata Sree Parijata nataka natya vaikhariki vighnambu gakunda Vighnesvarunndu vacche margambu parak". Further study of this matter is warranted.

In 1964, the venue for Bhagavata Mela was shifted to a site near Narayana Teertham, the site covering an expanse of about an acre a half, which was bought by V.D. Svami, a Chennai-based industrialist, who belonged to Melattur. He felt that the old venue situated between two rows of houses was cramped and congested and therefore he acquired and gifted the site, on the condition that henceforth plays should be staged only there. All agreed to this and in 1964, Prahlada and Harichandra were staged there. Usha Parinayam was to have been staged on the third day, but had to be cancelled following the demise of Jawaharlal Nehru. The very next year, a misunderstanding crept in

between two important persons, connected with Bhagavata Mela ---- Ramalinga Iyer and Ganesa Iyer. The latter formed a new group and named it Lakshmi Narasimha Jayanti Bhagavata Mela Natya Nataka Sangam and again went to the sannidhi of Varadaraja Temple for staging the plays, with the help of his son, Swaminathan Iyer. Natarajan, who is the present leader of this troupe is the son of Swaminatha Iyer. Balu Bhagavatar, Subba Iyer and some other key persons stayed back with Ramalinga Iyer and it was necessitated to start their troupe with the name, Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam and Mahalingam, son of Ramalinga Iyer today leads this troupe and they stuck to the word given to V.D. Svami, the donor and this Sangam's dramas are performed in the venue gifted by Svami. The reason for the split is not clearly known but there are different versions of the story. Some local people recall that Balu Bhagavatar turned against Ganesa Iyer, because he felt he had been belittled by the latter. It seems that the Maha Periyava of Kanchi Mutt, during his camp at Ilayattankudi presented a golden bracelet(Toda) to Balu Bhagavatar and that this provoked Ganesa Iyer to talk disparagingly of Balu Bhagavatar. Some say it is simply because of the 'Ego' among the troupes. There are stills others who say that one of the groups is only interested in keeping the participation a competitive spirit, but two groups in a small village enacting the plays, each separately, is not healthy, as felt by every well-wisher.

There is some apprehension among the villagers of Melattur that, while the two groups divided, Melattur also may succumb to 'alien' invasion as members of different religious community, flush with funds earned abroad, have come with irresistible offers to purchase local properties in other villages and succeeded in displacing old residents. If that would happen, they may object to performing theBhagavata Melas as public nuisance and the tradition could be placed in serious jeopardy. These well-wishers argue, the two groups should close ranks at least now, leaving their ego, if any. Whatever be the real reason, it is really too sad to find two different troupes in a small village performing this great art each of them separately.

The Bhagavata Mela tradition is among the few surviving links to ancient theatre. The compositions, music and dance as presented are of a very high order. As earlier said, only males portray the female roles. All dance-actors are amateurs engaged in different the Narasimha Jayanti festival, at their own expense and well in advance to go through the rehearsals. As the natakas are presented on the stage, the viewers and the actors lose their individual identities as they are transformed into devotees surcharged with emotions praying for the blessings of Lord Narasimha. On these and many other accounts, the Bhagavata Mela dance-drama is, no doubt, a very fine art of excellence with a mixture of sophisticated and rustic forms.

The famous dancer, Ram Gopal once wrote (Rhythm in The Heavens -P.143) very curiously, "Bharatanatya, the Dasi Attam of Tanjavur derives from the Bhagavata Mela nataka, the male dance-drama of the village Soolamangalam in Tanjavur district itself "! It is unfortunate that such a great dancer didn't know about either the Bharatanatya or the Bhagavata Mela, leave alone about the village Melattur that popularized it. Some other authors, very loosely have written that the influence of the Kuchipudi dance of Andhra Pradesh inspired the Telugu people living in the Tanjavur district, that they started to compose and enact Bhagavata Mela natakas. But the great research-scholar of the same Andhra Pradesh, Dr.S.V.Joga Rao in his Andhra Yakshagana Vangmayamu (Part I, P.194) has made it very clear, by stating a reverse one and averred that Kuchipudi plays were either borrowed or modeled on Bhagavata Mela dramas, after Hari Madhavayya's visit to Melattur Sabdas and dramas in the first half of the 19th century, into the Kunchipudi style. Dancers and teachers of Kunchipudi dance form, by and large, belonged to the Velanadu sect of Telugu Brahmins, whereas, not even a single Velandu artiste's name is found in any of the Tanjavur records. Giriraja Kavi of the Bhagavata Mela family, for instance, belonged to the Mulakanadu sect.

Though this great form is a product of Telugu Brahmins, it is in the present times fostered and performed with a high degree of dedication and devotion and lifetime involvement by non-Telugu

people in Tamilnadu. This should be greatly appreciated by the entire Telugu country and everyone including the Government should extend their patronage to it. It is the desire of all art lovers that this great art-form, presented for many locals, as well as, shedding the element of Ego among the players is felt absolutely necessary. We pray Lord Narasimha to shower a longer life on this ancient Bhagavata Melas.

Comparison Between Bharata Natyam and Bhagavata Mela

Natyacharya
Kalaimamani **Thanjavur B. Herambanathan**

Bharathanatyam and Bhagavatha Mela share a very close relationship.Both are divine and so pure that it has got a close bond with the sanctity of a Temple. Both are equally important elements of the classical art form. The statements below are on the traditional basis & have changed according to times. The comparisons done are a synopsis of the subject which can be primed more elaborately.

BHARATHANATYAM		BHAGAVATA MELA
Prayer song is sang by the vocalist & supported by the orchestra.	INVOCATION	'Pundareekam' is sang by the vocalists & followed as a chorus by all participating artist.
It is a preparation process before the program with only the 'vadyams'. This particular item will be in the raagam 'Naattai' and thaalam 'Kanda chaapu'.	MELA PRAPTHI	A pillayar shlokam ('Om Suklam Bharatharam') is sung & 'shollukattus' is said. Then followed by the Thodayamangalam. This together is called the MELAM KATTUTHAL.
Is performed with abhinaya.	THODAYAMANGALAM	Is sang in the bhajanai panthathi & shollukattus are said in different thaalams.
Salutation to God, Guru, Orchestra & Audience. The dancer entered the stage with 'thirai' traditionally.	ALLARIPPU	Is called as 'Mei'. Danced by the heroine who enters the stage with 'thirai paatu theermanam'
Is an individual item, with swarams and adavus choreographed in various designs.	JATHISWARAM	Is in the form of chittaswaram, danced by the hero or heroine during their introduction song (paathrapravesam).
Is performed in	SHABDHAM	Is performed together

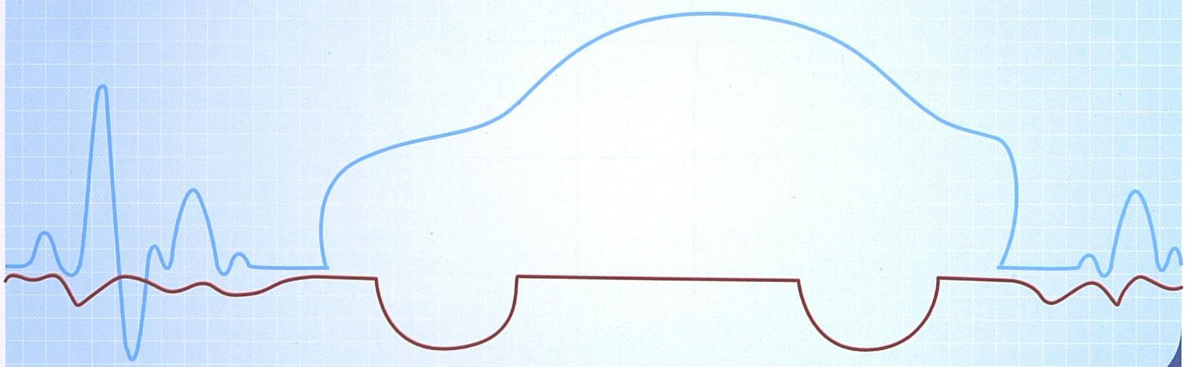
'Kambhoji' raagam & Misra chaapu thaalam in praise of one deity. Is an introduction item of abhinaya.		with the 'Melaprapthi'. It is a summary of the upcoming drama.
Is the piece-de-resistance of a margam. It is a combination of Theermanams, Sahityams & Swarams. The hero or nayaka of a varnam varies from one varnam to the other. E.g. Gods, Goddess, & Kings & Rulers.	**VARNAM**	Heroine in an important part performs the varnam which is very much connected to the storyline of the drama. (Elakuthaluthanamma; Ananthabhairavi, Adhi in 'Usha Parinayam). In Melattur there were many composers of varnams. E.g. Swarajathi 'Ye Mayaladira'; Huseini, Rupagam on Lord Varadaraja Perumal by Melattur Bharatham Shri Kasinatha Kavi.
Vrittam/slokam is sang before a keerthanai, sometimes in the same raga or at times in ragamalika where the concluding raga is as same as the raga of the keerthanam. It's in praise of any deities and has got no connection with the earlier items performed.	**KEERTHANAM**	There are no songs in the keerthanai paddhathi
It is performed with the hero &heroine Shringaram with any God or King as the hero.	**PADHAM**	The padham is related to the drama, and the God who is the hero of the drama is worshipped, sang and danced to by the heroine.
These items are performed as a variation	**JAVALI/ASTHAPADHI/ THEVARAM**	These items are not included or performed.

in the repertoire.	<u>/DIVYAPRABANDAM/ THIRUPPUGAZH</u>	
Has sahityams in the charanam. Was introduced & initially composed by Veerapathraiya.	<u>THILLANA</u>	No sahityams. Sung & performed by any important characters at the end of any song.
Mangalam is sung at the end of the margam.	<u>MANGALAM</u>	Mangala daru is sung at the end of the drama. 'Pundareekam' is again sang by the vocalists & followed as a chorus by all participating artist.
Male and female artistes perform and their costumes and make up are done accordingly with no particular character in reference to.	<u>ARTIST & AHARYA ABHINAYA</u>	Only male artistes performed both the male & female roles and their dress & make up are done according to the characters played by them in the particular drama.
Orchestra members consist of the Nattuvanar, Mridangam Vidwan, Vocalist, Flautist, Clarinet artiste and the violinist (optional). They stood at the back of the performing artistes.	<u>ORCHESTRA</u>	Is the same as the Bharathanatyam orchestra with the exception; of 2 nattuvanarstraditionally and a number of 4 vocalists. The nattuvanar stood at the back of the artistes, the rest on the right side of the artistes.
The songs are in the format of Pallavi, Anupallavi & Charanam. All raagams and thaalams are used in the compositions performed.	<u>COMPOSITIONS</u>	"Daru, Samvathadaru, Seesam, Thalapathyam, Mudukku, Dwipada, Saranudaru, Pravesadharu, Gandam, Gandapadyam, Choornikai, Naandhi slokam, Naandhi Dwipada, Elapatham" are part of the songs which

		depicts particular situations. Rare raagams like AHIRI, GANTA, KUMBAKAMBHOJI are given importance to in the compositions.
Either one artiste performs a solo or a number of artistes perform as group according to the choreography.	<u>CHARACTERS</u>	'Konangi' - this character is an avathar of Lord Perumal one who blesses the artistes, orchestra & rasikas so that the upcoming drama moves on smoothly without hurdles till the end. The character of 'Konangi' and 'Vinayagar' are must characters of all dramas. All other characters of the drama are played by various artistes.
Each 'kandigai'(lyric) is concluded with 'thattimettu adavu' in chatusra jathi & thisra jathi. The preparation (kaal thattuthal) of the dancer to begin the 'Theermanam'(Jathi) is danced to in 'Usi'. This is only done in Varnam. Abhinaya consist of padatharthabhinaya, vagyarthabhinaya & sanchari bhavams which is an option.	<u>CHOREOGRAPHY</u>	The 'thatthimettu adavu' in 'Usi' is performance basically after every lyric of the song throughout the drama and 'kaal Thattuthal' is also performed in 'Usi'. This is practiced in many songs performed in the drama. In addition, at the end of each stanza or kandikai in a composition, an 'ariti' such as 'dhi thi tai tam, dhi thi tai tam, dhi thi tai...' is performed as transition to the next stanza.Sanchari bhavams are a must &are done elaborately.
The tempo is constant	<u>TEMPO(KALAPRAMANAM)</u>	The tempo varies

throughout the repertoire.		**according to the characters, situations, and songs.**
Begins with the sisyarambam, then moves on step by step till arangetram and so on.	**<u>ABILITY</u>**	**An artiste with a good base of Bharata Natyam becomes an accomplished Bhagavata Mela artiste.**
<u>BHARATHANATYAM & BHAGAVATA MELA</u> **-The stage was lighted with oil lamp, then gas light and now electronic lamps.** **-It was then a non-microphonic orchestra, 'thitthi' was used as an instrument to maintain the 'struthi'.** **- Pioneer vidwans played a crucial role spreading the art forms worldwide.**		

The Bhagavata Mela art form has its roots in the villages, thus it has been classified as Folk Art. In true nature, this art form consists or is made up of pure classicality. Henceforth, we humbly request Government to categorize Bhagavata Mela as a classical art form of India.



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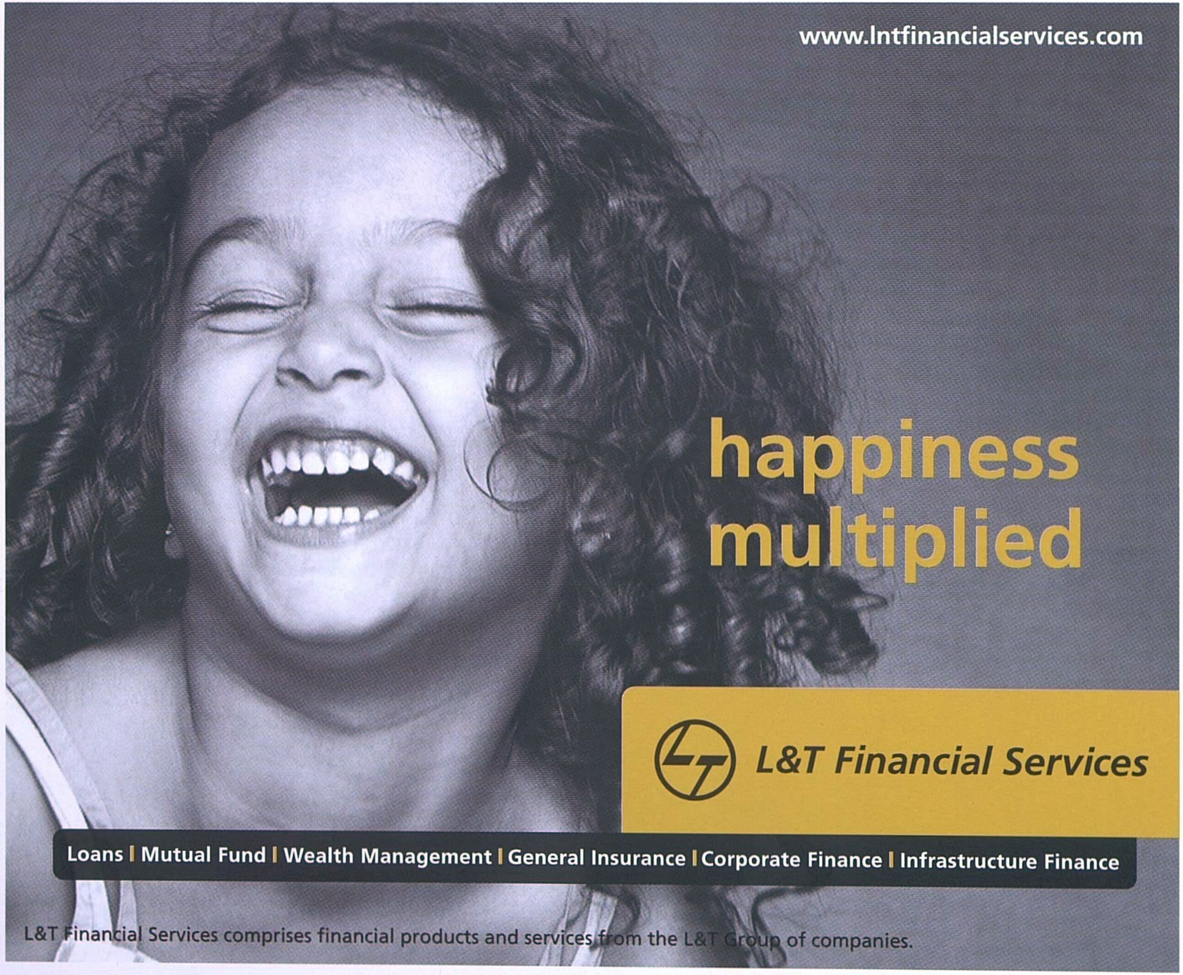
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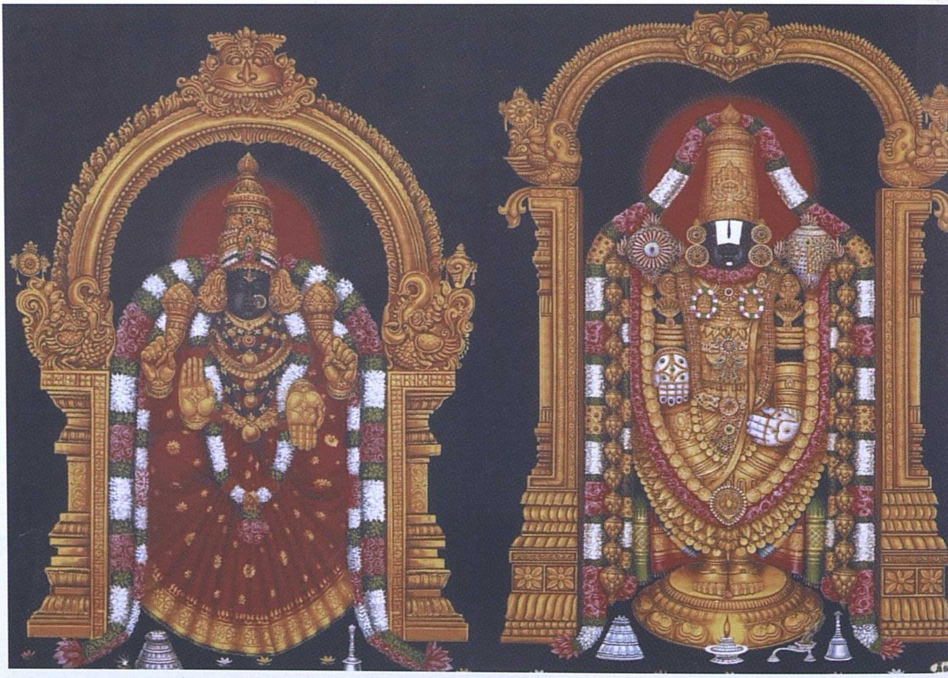

Performing Artistes Of Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam – Present

Dancers

***Bharatam* R. Mahalingam (a) Mali**, *Artistic Director, Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam; Lead Dance Artist – Has performed all leading and supporting male and female roles; Retired Village Administrative Officer*

***Bharatam* S. Gopalakrishnan**, *Secretary, Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam; Has played leading male villain and supporting male roles, and the role of Lord Narasimhar; Landlord*

***Bharatam* P. Ramaswamy**, *President, Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam; Has played all supporting male roles, and the role of Lord Narasimhar; Retired State Government Employee*

***Bharatam* K. Arunachalam**, *Has played all supporting male roles, and the role of Lord Narasimhar; Retired Head Master of High School at Dharmapuri*

***Bharatam* R. Subramanian**, *Has played leading female roles including Parvati, Rukmini, etc., and supporting female and male roles; Retired Superintendent of Central Excise*

Bharatam S. Nagarajan, *Lead Dance Artist – Has performed all leading male and female roles, Currently performs lead female roles of Leelavati, Chandramati and Rukmini in Prahlada, Harischandra and Rukmini Kalyanam, respectively, and performs lead male roles in other Natakams, Recipient of Scholarship from Sangeet Natak Akademi for Bhagavata Mela; Senior Manager, Canara Bank*

Bharatam S. Gobi, *Lead Dance Artist – Has performed all leading and supporting male and female roles, Recipient of Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar for Bhagavata Mela, Recipient of Scholarship from Sangeet Natak Akademi for Bhagavata Mela; Employed at SASTRA University*

Bharatam M. Swaminathan (a) Vinod, *Lead Dance Artist – Has played all leading and supporting male and female roles; Manager, Birla Sun Life Insurance*

S. Aravind, *Lead Dance Artist – Has performed leading and supporting male roles, Currently performing Hiranyakashipu in Prahlada; Dentist by profession, pursuing M. D. S.*

S. Anand, *Lead Dance Artist – Has performed leading and supporting male and female roles as well as child roles, Currently performing lead female roles such as Rukmini, Andal, Draupadi, Usha, and Bhooma Devi; Mechanical Engineer with BFA from SASTRA University*

B. Soorya, *Child Artist – Has performed the roles of Prahlada, Lohidasa and Vinayaka*

V. Adarsh, *Child Artist – Has performed the roles of Prahlada, Lohidasa and Vinayaka*

MUSICIANS & NATTUVANARS

Vocalists

Bharatam **(Late) Thirukkodikkaval P. S. Subramaniam (a) Papa Iyer**, *Lead Vocalist for 20 years, Trained vocalists for Bhagavata Mela, Composed music for Natakams; Retired Teacher in Middle School and Taught Carnatic Music Extensively; B-High Grade AIR Artist, Disciple of Sangeeta Kalanidhi Umayalpuram Swaminatha Iyer, Umayalpuram Venkatarama Iyer, and Sangeeta Kalanidhi Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer*

Bharatam'Harikatha' **N. Srinivasan**, *Lead Vocalist for 20 years, Compiled a Tamil Natakam* Geetodayam *from a 19th Century Mahabharatam Natakam, Published the Bhagavata Mela Natakam* Seetha Kalyanam *through Thanjavur Saraswati Mahal Library, Published many articles on Bhagavata Mela; Retired from Saraswati Mahal Library; AIR Harikatha Artist*

Murali Rangarajan, *Lead Vocalist for Seven Years, Compiled a Tamil Natakam* Andal Thirukkalyanam *from an old script, Composed music for Natakams, Disciple of Thirukkodikkaval Sri. P. S. Subramania Iyer; Associate Professor of Chemical Engineering and Materials Science at Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Coimbatore*

G. Kaliyamoorthy, *Lead Vocalist for, Professional Musician, Disciple of Madurai Sri. Somu, Music Teacher at GSK Schools, Kuttalam and Kumbakonam*

B. Devnath, *Lead Vocalist, Grandson of Alathur Brothers, Mechanical Engineer from SASTRA University*

Nattuvanars

H. Hariharan, *Nattuvanar of Bhagavata Mela, Disciple of Kalaimamani K. P. Kittappa Pillai, Kalaimamani T. G. Bavu Pillai and Kalaimamani B. Herambanathan, Professional Dancer and Dance Teacher, Teaches at GSK Schools*

Bhagavata Mela at Thepperumanallur

Pracheena Sampradhaya Natya Nataka Mandram – Thepperumanallur

Thepperumanalur, a small ancient village with a population of around 5000 people, situated near Kumbakonam Town of Thanjavur District and it is very near to famous Uppiliappan Temple and Raghusthalam Thirunageswaram. This village was once called "Dhevarajapuram" and "Dhakshinakanchi".

The famous "Annadhana Sivan" who was born and lived in this village was adored by Sri Sri Paramacharya ChandrasekarendraSaraswathi Swamigal of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham. The village is famous for the performance of Pracheena Sampradhaya natya natakas, a set of Bhagavata mela dramas is being conducted at Varadharaja Perumal Sannadhi for more than 300 years. Once,Sarabhoji Maharaja of Thanjavur had summoned the people of these drama artists to perform the Prahlada Charitharam drama at their palace at Thanjavur. While the artists performing the drama at palace based on the order of Maharaja, they found lot of scorpions (in Tamil, it is called "Thel") in the drama costume baggage. From onwards, the name of this village is being called "Thelperumanallur or Thepperumanallur". After that they conducted the drama in this village itself.

Originally, the Bhagavata Mela dance dramas were conducted by the village artists, containing ten dramas such as PrahladaCharithram (two days), Rukmangatha Charithram, Ambarisha Charithram, Devaki Kalyanam, Krishnavathararam, Kamsa Vadham, Usha Parinayam, Seetha Kalyanam and Rukmini Kalyanam,. Now due to financial constraints and also migration of artist's families to different places from the village, only two dramas including the main drama namely Prahlada Charithram, and Rukmini Kalyanam are being performed during Narasimha Jayanthi day, without break in the last more than 300 years. The yesteryear generation headed by late Sri T.V. Natesa Bhagavathar, followed by Late Sri N. Muthumani Iyer had conducted the dramas. Sri.N.Muthumani had been honoured the prestigious "Kalaimamani" award by the Tamil nadu Government for his services toBhagavatha Mela dramas. Until the year 2011, the vocal music of the dance drama had been handled neatly under the guidance of Thepperumanallur Late Sri.N.Ramachandran @ Raju Bhagavathar, a senior Music vidwan, Pondicherry All India Radio Artist, who was hailed from the family of musicians. He was well supported by a team of musicians, including his elder son Sri.R.Raviswaminathan on vocal, besides a set of senior Bhagavatas such as Sri.E.K.Srinivasa Iyer(EKS), Sri.E.K.Jayarama Iyer(EKJ) and Thepperumanallur Sri. Narasu Bhagavathar.

Now, the dramas are being staged under the guidance of Sri N. Narashimhan, Retired Railway Employee, the son of Late Sri T.V. Natesa Bhagavathar. He is well versed with these dance dramas since his childhood days. He is having the experience of performed almost all the lead roles in the different period of time in the last 70 years. Now, he is being assisted by Thepperumanallur Sri R.Raviswaminathan, elder son of Late Sri.Raju Bhagavathar, on the vocal main support, who is being assisted by senior Bhagavathas Sri. E.K.S, Sri. E.K.J and Narasu Bhagavathar, N. Ramachandran who is taking care the music section with a set of prominent bhagavathas and Sri. M. Kalyanaraman is assisting in training the drama artists.

Previously, Sri.Raviswaminathan, the main singer of the Bhagavatha Mela Drama, had taken the lead role of Prahlada at his tender age of 10 and he use to sing and act the role Prahlada for many years. As part of encouragement, many articles were published those days in all the leading news papers/magazines including 'The Hindu',Vikatan, etc . Later, he has taken full incharge of the main vocal section.

The specialty of this "Prahlada Charithram" dance drama, is handling of three languages, which includes songs (dwipadas) in telegu language, Slokams in Sanskrit taken from Bhagavatham and dialogues in Tamil. The highlight of this drama is conversation between Prahlada& Hiranya at the climax scene before the Narasimha Avatharam, is adored by lot of devotees from all over India who have gathered to watch this beautiful dance drama.

From the year 2011, Sri.Raviswaminathan Bhagavathar and Sri. Narasu Bhagavathar have got the opportunity of giving the music performances of Bhagavatha Mela songs at Krishna Gana Sabha and Vani Mahal Chennai during their Namasankeerthana Festival. It has been well supported by the rasikas of chennai. In the year 2011, Late Thepperumanallur Sri.Raju Bhagavathar had performed along with the above bhagavathas and some part of the programme has been uploaded in www.youtube.com. The links for the above programme has been mentioned below.

1. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHGCOmfcado
2. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AMHrxGgj84
3. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOLn5B-4Jpw
4. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4UcHVycsrc
5. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvbaQQauY1o
6. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8Frgy1AMvA
7. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tbmNN8mQ0E

Apart from Varadharaja Perumal temple, Vedhanthanayaki sametha Sri Viswanatha Swami temple and Kaliamman temple are also in this village. The latter is particularly well known locally, where kaliamman Utsavam and Theemidhi utsavam are being performed every year during the Tamil month Panguni.

This year, the Bhagavata Mela Trust is organizing the drama festival, where the Prahlada Charitharam is going to be staged on 23rd May 2013 at the sannadhi of Varadaraja Perumal Temple, Thepperumanallur. The dance drama will commence at 10.00 p.m. and ends at 4.30 A.M. on the following day. Donations are accepted and can be sent to the following address Pracheena Sampradhaya Natya Nataka Mandram Agraharam Thepperumanallur, Kumbakonam, 612 206. Also, donations are accepted to the credit of Current Account No.004109000131137 of 'City Union Bank Ltd - Kumbakonam Main branch'.

Bhagavata Mela of Saliyamangalam[2]

Dr. Murali Rangarajan

Among the various villages where the temple theater form Bhagavata Mela has survived into the 21st Century is Saliyamangalam, 16 km from Thanjavur. On Narasimha Jayanti, Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Bhagavata Mela Bhaktha Samajam, comprising a well-knit Saliyamangalam community of 32 families, organizes the Utsav where *Prahlada Charitram* and *Rukmini Parinayam* are performed. Saliyamangalam traces its ascendancy to the regime of the king Achuthappa Naik (1580-1614 AD) who created a number of agraharams. At that time Saliyamangalam was known as Achuthapuram. The Natakams are compositions of Bharatham Panchanatha Bhagavatar with assistance from Natanam Kasinatha Ayyah. He is also known to have composed three other Natakams, namely *Vipranarayana Charitram, Rukmangada Charitram,* and *Seetha Kalyanam*, though these scripts are not available.

Prahlada Charitram is enacted on the day of Narasimha Jayanti. On the previous night, Lord Narasimha is invoked in holy water kept in a pot or 'kudam' through Vedic chants. The Narasimha mask made of wood is washed, cleaned, and kept in another vessel. On the day of Narasimha Jayanti, the mask is repainted and the Lord is invoked in it from the holy water. Pranaprathishta, Sahasranama archana, and deeparadhana are performed to the mask in the evening, *i.e.*, asura sandhya kalam, in the presence of a large gathering. The presiding deity Lord Srinivasa and his consorts Sri Devi and Bhoo Devi are then brought from the temple on Garuda Vahana in a procession to the music of Nadaswaram, and kept in a specially erected pandal at the center of the agraharam. Before the start of the Natakam, the Bhagavatars sing bhajans and sabdam, and this is called 'Thattuchutru'.

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[2]Based on the articles: "Thrill of Saliyamangalam", K. Subramanian, Indian Express, 1976; "Drama in Divine Ambience", Gowri Ramnarayan, The Hindu, June 7, 2002, and personal interviews and discussions with artistes and audience who have taken part in the festival.

After pooja, the deity and the consorts are taken to the other end of the pandal facing the stage.

The Bhagavatars sing Thodyamangalam on the stage and then Konangi and Lord Vinayaka appear. Before introducing Hiranyakashipu, the katha sangraha sabdam (Sabdam containing the synopsis of the story) is sung in Kambhoji ragam with a bhagavatar enacting the words. The main patras or characters, Hiranyakashipu, Leelavati and Prahlada are then introduced. A dwipada (couplets) is sung before the introduction of each character which describes the character's appearance, dress, jewelry etc. worn by the character. The patra pravesha darus are in the ragas Kamas, Devagandhari, Pantuvarali, Bhairavi, and Thodi.

Among the characters in the Prahlada Charitram is the Panchangakara or the horoscope-casting priest, who is supposed to have been played by Panchanata Bhagavatar himself. In fact, the patra pravesham of this character contains the words "Panchanata batlu vachenu".

Another fascinating aspect of the night-long Natakam is the manner of appearance of Lord Narasimha. Before the appointed hour of the asura sandhya kalam, the entire village disappears for a purificatory bath. The men return with fresh vibhuti, the women with kumkumam and damp hair tied in a knot. The Lord does not appear on the stage but at the rear end of the street. The audience is rearranged for the final combat between the Lord Narasimha and Hiranyakashipu. A long strip is carpeted with flowers such as jasmine for the Lord's progress in a state of enraged trance. Seated on an ancient grinding stone (ural), smeared with sandal paste, once the actor puts on the divine mask, he transforms into the Lord Narasimha and loses all consciousness of the self. The pillar which Prahlada declares as the residence of the Lord is torn apart and the Lord appears to the hail of crackers and sparklers. The devotees then garland him for wish fulfillment. As the day breaks, Narasimha's *krodha* melts into *karuna* for his devotees.

(Reference: Materials obtained from Sri. D. S. Lakshmanan, President, Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Bhagavatha Mela Bhaktha Samajam, Saliyamangalam)

Part - III

Ancient Temple Theater Forms Of South India

இரணியனைக் கீண்ட சிங்கப்பிரான்

முனைவர் : குடவாயில் பாலசுப்ரமணியன்

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பல்லவர் சிற்பங்களிலும், அடியார் சிற்பங்களிலும், சோழர் சிற்பங்களிலும் பாண்டியர் சிற்பங்களிலும் பின்வந்த பல்வேறு மரபு மன்னர்களின் பாங்குறு படைப்புகளிலும் நரசிங்கத்தோடு பொருதும் இரணியனின் காட்சிகளை அற்புதமாகக் காணலாம். இவ்வாறு தமிழகம் முழுவதும் திகழும் பலநூற்றுக்கணக்கான சிற்பக் காட்சிகள் வரிசையில் தலையாயதாகத் திகழும் சில படைப்புகள் பற்றி இனிக் காண்போம்.

நாமக்கல் உக்கிர நரசிம்மர்

தகடூரைத் (தர்மபுரி) தலைநகரமாகக் கொண்டு ஆண்ட அதியமான் மரபு மன்னர்கள் கலைக்கு பெரும் தொண்டாற்றியுள்ளனர். கி.பி.8 ஆம் நூற்றாண்டில் சோமன் என்னும் அதியேந்திரன் நாமக்கல்லில் உள்ள மலையில் இரண்டு குடைவரைக் கோயில்களைத் தோற்றுவித்தான். ஒன்று நரசிம்மருக்காக எடுக்கப்பெற்றது. மற்றது பள்ளிகொண்ட பெருமாளுக்கெனத் தோற்றுவிக்கப் பெற்றதாகும். நரசிம்மர் குடைவரையை அங்குள்ள கல்வெட்டு அதியேந்திர விண்ணகரம் என்று கூறுகின்றது. இக்கோயிலின் சுவரில் மிகப் பிரமாண்டமான நரசிம்மரின் திருவுருவம் செதுக்கப்பெற்று காணப்பெறுகின்றது. தன் வலக்காலைத் தரையில் ஊன்றி இடக்காலை உயர்ந்த மேடைமீது வைத்தவாறு

நரசிம்மர் தம் இடத்தொடை மீது இரணியனை கிடத்தியுள்ளார். வாளும் கேடயமும் தன்னிருகரங்களில் ஏந்திய இரணியன் செயலிழந்து கிடக்கின்றான். தன் ஒருவலக்கரத்தால் இரணியனின் இட முழங்காலையும், ஒரு இடக்கரத்தால் அவன் வலக்கரத்தையும் பற்றி மேலே உயர்த்தி ஒரு தொடை மீது அவன் உடலை அமர்த்தியுள்ளார். அதே நேரத்தில் தன் முன்னிருகரங்களை அவன் மார்பில் செலுத்தி உடலைப் பிளக்கின்றார். பின் கரங்களில் சங்கு, சக்கரம், வாள், வில் ஆகியவை திகழ்கின்றன. அண்ணலின் முகத்தில் கோப ஆவேசத்தைக் காண முடிகின்றது. இத்தனை ரௌத்திரத்துடன் மிகபிரமாண்டமாகத் திகழும் உக்கிர நரசிம்மரின் இந்த சிற்பம் உலக கலைவல்லோரால் மிகவும் போற்றப் பெறும் சிறப்புடையதாகும்.

<u>திருமீயச்சூர் நரசிம்மன்</u>

திருமியக்சூர் என்னும் சிவத்தலம் திருவாரூர் மயிலாடுதுறை நெடுஞ்சாலையில் உள்ளது. தூங்கானை மாடம் என்னும் கஜபிரிஷ்ட அமைப்பில் திகழும் இச்சிவாலயத்து ஸ்ரீவிமானத்து கோஷ்டங்களின் மேற்புறம் பேரெழில் வாய்ந்த மகர தோரணச் சிற்பங்கள் பலவுள்ளன. அவற்றுள் ஒரு தோரணத்தில் காணப்பெறும் இரணியனின் உடலைத் தன் இருகரங்களாலும் பிளக்கும் நரசிம்மரின் சிற்பத்திற்கு இணையானதோர் படைப்பினை வேறு எங்கும் காணல் அரிது. மகரதோரண சிற்பங்களுக்கேயுரிய தொங்கல்கள், பூவேலைப்பாடுகள், சிம்மவீரர்கள் போன்ற அணி அழகோடு நடுவே திகழும் அரைவட்டப் பகுதிக்குள் நரசிங்கத்தின் திருவுருவம் காணப்பெறுகின்றது.

வாளும் கேடயமும் ஏந்தித் தாக்கவந்த இ ரணியனை பத்துக்கரங்களோடு திகழும் நரசிம்மர் ஒருகாலைத் தரையில் ஊன்றி இரணியனின் கேடயம் பிடித்த இடக் கையையும் வலக் காலையும் கிடுக்குப்பிடியாக பிடித்தவாறு அவன் உடலைத் தரையிலிருந்து மேலுயர்த்தி நிறுத்தியுள்ளார். அவன் இடக்காலையும் தலைமுடியையும் இருகரங்கரங்களால் பற்றி உடலை முண்டாதவாறு பிடித்துள்ளார். நரசிங்கரின் முன்னிரு கரங்கள் அவன் மார்பை பிளந்து நிற்கின்றன. மற்ற கரங்களில் சங்கு, சக்கரம் முதலியவற்றோடு அவர்தம் ஆயுதங்கள் உள்ளன. ஒருகரம் மேலுயர்ந்து விஸ்மயம் என்னும் பெருவியப்பு

முத்திரையினைக் காட்டுகின்றது. நரசிம்மத்தின் கோபத்தின் முழுவெளிப்பாடும் வாய்பிளந்த அனல் பறக்கும் அம்முகத்தில் காணப்பெறுகின்றது. கீழே ஒருபுறம் அமர்ந்த நிலையில் தலைக்குமேல் கையுயர்த்தி வணங்கும் கோலத்தில் இரணிய கசிபின் தேவி காணப்பெறுகின்றாள். அவள் தோற்றமே கணவனுக்காக மன்றாடுகிறது. வாளும் கேடயமும் ஏந்திய இரணியனின் மெய்க்காவலன் ஒருபுறம் அஞ்சி ஓடுகின்றான்.

கடும் சினம், பேராற்றலின் வெளிப்பாடு ஆகியவற்றைக் காட்டும் ஓரடி உயரமேயுடைய திருமீயச்சூர் சிற்பக் காட்சியனை நாமக்கல்லில் உள்ள பிரமாண்ட சிற்பத்துடன் ஒப்பிட்டு நோக்குவோமாயின் அதியனின் அப்படைப்பு சோழனின் படைப்பிற்கு அடுத்த நிலையில் தான் இருப்பதைக் காணலாம்.

பாற்கடலைக் கடைந்த போது பயன்படுத்தப் பெற்ற மேருமலையை நொய்து எனத்தூக்கி எறிந்த வலியுடையவன் இரணியன் என்பதைக் கம்பர்,

'பண்டு வானவர் தானவர் யாவரும் பற்றி
தென் திரைக்கடல் கடைதர வலியது தேடிக்
கொண்ட மத்தினைக் கொற்றத் தன் குலவு தோட்கு அமைத்த
தண்டு எனக் கோளலுற்று, அது நொய்து எனத் தவிர்த்தான்'

என்பார். அத்தகு வலிமையுடைய இரணியனை நொய்து எனக் கிழிக்கும் நரசிம்மரின் இச்சிற்பமோ எத்தகையது என்பதை நேரில் சென்று காண்பவர்கள் மட்டுமே உணர முடியும்.

விஜயநகர அரசு காலத்தில் தமிழகத்தில் திகழந்த குறுநில மன்னர்கள் எடுத்த ஆலயங்கள் பலவற்றுள் இரணியனின் உடல் கீண்ட நரசிம்மரின் உருவச் சிற்பங்கள் காணப்பெறுகின்றன. இவை பெரும்பாலும் தூண்களில் பெரிய அளவில் திகழ்கின்றன. குடுமியான்மலை, திருவரங்கம், அழகர்கோயில், தாடிக்கொம்பு, கும்பகோணம், திருக்குறுங்குடி போன்ற இடங்களில் உள்ள திருக்கோகயில்களில் காணப்பெறும் நரசிம்மர் சிற்பங்கள் குறிப்பிடத் தக்கவையாகும்.

Kaisikapurana Natakam – A Temple Theatre

Prof. S. Ramanujam

Kaisiki is a melody. Its origin is based on a Tamil Pann - a musical rendering which is associated with the Raga Bhairavi as per the Carnatic music system. Kaisika purana natakam is centered on this melody which pleases the Lord Vadivazhakia Nambi. A myth exists that a Brahmin is redeemed from his curse of being demon by a Chandala bhaktha through the merits of this melody, gained while singing the praise of the Lord in it. The belief is that this myth happened at Thirukkurunkudi, one of the important pilgrim centres of Vaishnavites in the southern part of Tamilnadu. Kaisika ekadasi day is considered as an auspicious occasion in which the people throng together to witness the play performed inside the temple during the night. It is the tenth day of ascending order of the moon between the middle of November and December every year. The day itself is known as Kaisiki Ekadasi and the Kaisiki Natakam is enacted for more than three hours to make the devotees spend a night fully awake. The uniqueness is that The Lord along with his spouses and His devoted saints are the main spectators to witness the play.

Only in this village it is enacted as a play; but the story which is known as Kasika Mahathmayam is read with the interpretation given by Parasara Pattar, a disciple of Ramanuja in almost all Vishnu temples during the dawn of Dwadasi, the eleventh day. Hence history goes beyond twelfth century and evidences say that royal patronage had been given to enact this play at Thirukkurunkudi during the Naik's period i.e. during thirteen fifties.

There are sixteen offerings submitted to Gods at sayaraksha puja, *i.e.*, the evening rituals, as adorations. Music, dance and theatre are some of these offerings in these adorations. Kaisikapurana Nataka is an elaborative offering done once in a year for keeping the devotees awake for a whole night, which could not be done away with. While witnessing the performance twenty years ago I found to my sorrow

that the form had been completely ruined and was almost dead. The major problems involved in the revival process are as follows:

- There was no performance at all except some prompting from a person with a hand book, who has to be there just because of the hereditary right and nothing with the art form and its tradition. With a hope of gaining God's grace people are ready to keep awake for a whole night to witness a divine drama but nothing was on the stage.
- The play is centered on 'kaisikam' a melody known as 'Bhairavi' as per our Carnatic music tradition; but no music was found in the performance.
- Traditional female dancers of devadasi tradition took part; yet there ware very little movements.
- Even with impressive dramatic dialogue in the text rooted in Vaishnavite philosophy, there was no rendering at all.
- A fouled aesthetic image was submitted to Sundaraparipoornam, the Lord of beauty.

When eradication of devadasis from the temple occurred during the earlier phase of twentieth century, the devotion of the two devadasis made their presence on the stage as a matter of ritual which became only a routine and was not artistic at all. The devotion of the artists made an impact that the tradition could be regained. But it is the ardent wish and the inspiration from Dr. Anita Ratnam made me meet the challenge of reconstructing the form and restore the lost ritual theatre tradition back to the temple. A flash of an idea on Duraikkannu Ammal who participated in the temple theatre of Sarabhendra Pooopalak kuravanji at Thanjai Brahadeeswarer temple provoked to steer the work with her through her son-in-law Herambanathan who is also a traditional dance master. Their link with Bhagavata Mela made to involve artists from the same theatre form which served as an initial experiment in the process of the revival of Kaisiki Natakam. Even though care had been taken to evolve a form not reflecting Bhagavata Mela yet there are one or two reflections still. But these reflections add to a traditional flavour which exists in Bhagavata Mela also.

A traditional form could retain its spirit and its shape until the guru does not wish to deviate from the form and the version which has been transmitted to him by his elder generation. The loss such a guru will naturally make the form to sustain with the experience of the senior artist of the group. The demise of the guru and lack of a well trained senior artist led Kaisika Natakam to a degenerate form. Since all our traditional theatre forms are rooted in the rhythm of foot steps with a patterned body positions and hand positions as expressive gestures the performances with such modes helped retain the continuity of the spirit. A lack in the continuity of spirit will occur because of the lack of a guru's ability in conducting the required rehearsals when a theatre form is passed to young generation. But as far as Kaisikam is concerned, a void prevailed due to the fact that there was no one to continue the training needed for the form after the demise of the Nattuvanar, the master during the early phase of the twentieth century. Moreover the devadasi who was brought from a nearby temple during that period was not aware of the form at all. In such a stage the alternative is to have a Bharatha natyam master. Bharatha natyam is a reconstructed form of sathir of devadasi's and it is inclined more to a nature of exhibit than a community's aesthetic enjoyment of its origin. Hence dance-dramas could be evolved by nattuvanars of Bharatha natyam which would make only witnessing rasikas and not participating devotees which a rupakam like Kuravanchi - a theatre form – would do.

Rupakam is a term handed over from Natya sastra with a concept not on a style but on modes which could be evolved in to a shape pertaining to a goal. Koodiattam, Krishnan attam, Bhagavata Mela, Kuchupudi natakam and Kaisika purana natakam are different kinds of uparupakas and each one has to differ from the other due to the purpose each has emerged. They are not directed by a single creative ability. They have evolved through collective imagination and well-versed creativity, assimilated mind and gurus have to give practice only. Any omission or addition will occur in these forms only when the guru is a genius. Yet they will add only to the native sparks of the traditional expressions. It is these native sparks along with a

devotional attitude that make most of the traditional theatre forms exist.

A constant attempt in the process of re-creation of Kaisikapurana Natakam is being carried on to capture its native sparks rather than make it a replica of Bhagavata Mela or dance-drama. Even Bhagavata Mela has to get rid of the reflection of a dance-drama and recapture traditional sparks of its own rupaka. Both the Kaisikinatakam and the Bhagavata Mela are ritual theatre. But the uniqueness of kaisikam is it is a temple theatre which is performed on ekadasi day within the temple precinct along with other rituals performed for a couple of days.

"The basic function of a ritual play is not to unravel to knot of suspense. On the contrary the purpose of a ritual is to make the viewer realize his own self and take him towards God. Normally the purpose of the play is to provide pleasure to the viewer with artistic content and expression. But a play associated with temple rituals takes the viewer to a higher level of religious consciousness and make him aware of his inner life". Dr. Anita Ratnam, Reconstruction of KAISKAPURANAM. The temple tradition of devadasi cult - A Gender prespective. Ph.D. Thesis page no. 239.

Yaksha Gaana – Kuchipudi and Bhagavata Mela

Dr. Pappu Venugopala Rao

Yaksha Gaana has been a term which is in vogue for nearly 550 years. This term has been used if I may say so 'loosely' by various writers, literary historians and critics. The Kuchipudi dance dramas were known as Yaksha Gaanas by the authors and lakshanakaras, similarly the dance dramas of Bhagavata Mela were also termed Yaksha Gaanas. Even the three operas of Thyagaraja Swamy, the Prahalada Bhakti Vijayam, Nauka Charitram and Sree Sitarama Vijayam were termed by many scholars as Yaksha Gaanas. The period of Nayak rulers of Tanjore was the high point when Yaksha Gaanas were written in hundreds by the kings themselves and their court poets and poetesses. The Harikathas authored by Harikatha Pitamaha in Andhra, Srimad Ajjada Adibhatla Narayana Das were entitled YakshaGaanas by himself. Do all these various works deserve this term? Let us see actually what the etymology of the word is, its origin, evolution, and how the term has become expanded in one way and contracted in another way.

The first ever mention in Telugu literature of Yaksha Gaana is found in *PanditaaraadhyaCharitra* of Paalakuriki Somanaatha (1280-1340), where he says:

Aadata gandharva yaksha vidyaadha
raadulai paadedu naadedu vaaru.......

But a more clear mention is seen in Sreenaathaa's *Bheemeswara Puraana* (ch 3, verse 65), where he says:

Keertintu reddani keerti gandharvulu
gaandgarvamuna yakshagaana sarani

This work is said to be written around 1430 AD. In the original Sanskrit work of Bheemeswara Puraana we don't find the word Yaksha Gaana.

This leads us to infer that by the time of Sreenaatha the concept of Yaksha Gaana was sufficiently popular. There are several evidences in later Telugu literature to covincingly prove the existence and popularity of Yaksha Gaana by the 15 century. Critics have proved beyond any shadow of doubt that the earliest format of Yaksha Gaana was primarily one of oral tradition, musical in nature, fit to be sung as the very name suggests, and was sung by a sect of people known as *yekkala gaanalu* and *jakkula* women. It is also proved that the concept of Yaksha Gaana embraced dance in course of time, apart from being just musical in nature, but remained as a folk art with only oral tradition. The format and the structure of Yaksha Gaana attracted the attention of poets and they gave it a discipline and definite shape, and brought it within the gamut of rules of prosody and poetics.

The earliest written Yaksha Gaana in Telugu Literature is *Saubhari Charitam* of Proluganti Chenna Sauri of late 15th century, which is not available today. *Sugreeva Vijayamu*, of Kandukoori Rudrakavi of late 16th century seems to be the earliest available Yaksha Gaana in Telugu literature. There are many evidences to show that by 15th century, Yaksha Gaana which was till then in oral tradition only, was taken up by poets and became a much sought-after form of writing attempted by scholars and also became stageworthy with a classical format. There are several other Yaksha Gaanas available to us whose dates are not known and some of them like the *Garudaachala Vilaasam* of Dinavahi Ahobilakavi seem to be earlier than that of Kandukoori Rudrakavi.

Yaksha Gaanas can be classified into three categories:

1.Those written just for the pleasure of reading and listening to- *Sravya Yaksha Gaanas*

2. Those fit to be staged- *Drusya Yaksha Gaanas*

3.Those fit for both - *sravya* as well as *drusya* Yaksha Gaanas.

Based on their utility, the *Drusya* kind of Yaksha Gaanas are classified into four categories:

1. *Veedhi Natakas* 2. *Bommalata* 3. ***Marga natakas*** and 4. Modern dramas.

The Kuchipudi Yaksha Gaanas and the Bhagavata Mela Natakaas of Melattur come under the third category.

Some people seem to entertain a very low opinion of the Yaksha Gaana, based on their earlier folk nature and ignorantly equate it with some kind of a nonclassical form of art even after it attained a classical format. In fact a careful look at the structure of the Yaksha Gaanas would reveal that it is one of the richest aspects of Telugu literature. It has been a successful tool in bridging the gap between the elite and the masses with its content in music, literature and dance as well. It is a comprehensive form of art which contains various components like *kalaapam, prabandham, koravanji, veedhi natakam, bommalaata, harikatha, marga natakam* etc. It is a very rare kind of literary aspect which embraces so many art forms in its structure. Even in content, Yaksha Gaanas stand in an enviable situation because their content pervades almost into every aspect of literature: There are yakshagaanaas with historical plots, pauranic, social, folklore, philosophical and about divine marriages, etc. Though Yaksha Gaanaas with major rasa as Sringaara are prominent, there are many which depict other rasas as well. Thus Yaksha Gaanaas occupy a unique place in literature.

The most important aspect of Yaksha Gaanaas is their structure, which made them adaptable for almost any form of performing art. Let us examine some of the salient aspects of the structure of Yaksha Gaanaas, with examples from traditional Yaksha Gaanaas and see how the same patterns are employed in Kuchipudi dance dramas.

The most frequently used meter in Yaksha Gaanaas is *Ragada*. There are 9 varieties of them. All of these fall under the four rhythmic patterns commonly used.

Examples:

1.Each line of a*Vrishabhagati* ***ragada*** contains 4 phases of 7 *laghus* each.

Triputareku is a composition which contains 2 lines of *Vrushabhagati ragada* minus 7 *laghus.*

Eg: *lalitagaatrudu subhacharitrudu dalitasatrudu sujanamitrudu nalinanetrudu kandukoori janaradanundu......*

From Sugreeva vijayam

When sung, it runs like this:

takita kitataka takita kitataka (thrice) + *takka takita*

2. Each line of a***Dwiradagati ragada*** contains any four of the 6 *ganas*: *Naga, nalala, bha, sala, ta, ra*

Jhampereku is a composition which contains 2 lines of***dwiradagati ragada*** minus 1 *laghuvu.*

Eg:

Suraraja sannutiki suruchiraadhara matiki
karunaa rasonnatiki garudaadri patikin

From Garudaachalam

When sung it runs like this:

Kita takita kita takita ..... takita

The rhythmic pattern in these compositions is seen in almost every Kuchipudi dance drama. One half of any ***reku,*** the kind of compositions illustrated above is called ***artha chandrika.*** Artha chandrikas are as old as rekus and are found almost in every traditional Yaksha Gaanaa. We find a lot of artha chandrikas in most of the earlier Kuchipudi dance dramas.

Examples:

1.From a traditional Yaksha Gaanaa entiltled Saarada Koravanji of Poluganti Venkata Krishnayya:

panneeta jalakambu baagugaa naaden

sariganchu cheera chengulu deerchi katten

2. In a Kuchipudi dance drama, Aniruddha Naatakam of Duggaraju Chidambarakavi:

yuga tantrinipuri taganeledu sree
khaga gamanuni padayugamu smarintun

3. In the same:

ati veduka paarvati garbhamunu
ddhati buttina ganapati madi talatun.

Another very salient feature of the Yaksha Gaanaas is *Daruvu,* which is nothing but *Dhruva* defined by Bharata in the 32 chapter verses 23-24 of Naatya Saastra:

Praavesiki tu prathamaa dwitiyaaksepikee smrita
praasadiki triteeyaa cha chturthee cha antaraa dhruvaa
naishkramikee cha vijneyaa panchamee cha dhruvaa budhaih

Of the five dhruvaas mentioned by Bharata, the *praavesiki dhruva* is equivalent to *pravesika daruvu* employed in the Yaksha Gaanaas. While one of the prominent aspects of Yaksha Gaanaa structure is pravesika daruvu, it is also a salient feature of the Kuchipudi and Bhagavata Mela dance dramas, where a major character is introduced in the drama. Apart from this form of daruvu which introduces characters, there are other kinds of daruvus in Yaksha Gaanaas which are used for different purposes. Daruvus are employed to describe a character, entrance of a character, the character speaking about itself, conversational daruvus, description of nature, narration of an episode of the drama, and so on.

Raaju vedale ravi tejamu ladaraga
kudi y edamala dhal kattulu merayaga

kora meesamunu gira gira tripputu...
is a description of the exit of a king from the stage, from a traditional Yaksha Gaanaa, which is called as *nishkraamiki dhruva* by Bharata.

For the Pravesika Daruvu there are any number of examples in the Kuchipudi repertoire.

Examples:

1. *Bhaamane Satya Bhamane.....* in the Bhama kalaapam.
2. *Kanaka kasyapudanu danujendrudu*
   ghanata toda tana sabhaku vacchenu... In Prahlaada naatakam

Similarly in the Bhagavata Mela dance dramas also there are pravesika daruvus.

Example:

In the Prahlaada Charitra of Melattur Venkatarama Sastry Leelavati's pravesika daruvu in Athana runs like this:

Ocche nidigo Leelavati....

In Usha kalyanam, Baanaasura's pravesika daruvu in Todi runs like this:

Baannasuru didigo vedalina...

In Rukmaangada Charitra, the Pravesika Daruvu of Mohini in Khamas runs like this:

Kalakala nagu momuto muddu loluku...

Apart from pravesika daruvu we find many other kind of daruvus employed in the Kuchipudi and Bhagavata Mela dance dramas.

Siggayenamma ..... in madhyamaavati and

madana.. madana.. popularly known as madana daruvu usually sung in Aanada Bhairavi, both from Bhaamaa Kalaapam are random examples of this trend in Kuchipdi repertiore. In the Bhagavatamela dramas the following examples testify to the fact that daruvus are frequently employed.

Examples:

Hitulu mantrulu purohitulu bhoopalulu koluva.. . in Rukmangada charitra,

Paahi Sambho prabho ....in Nilambari from Usha Kalyanam,

and *Emani ne taaludunamma* ....in Aahiri from Prahlada Charitra..

One finds that after the Ragadas and Daruvus, the third most important constituent of a Yaksha Gaanaa is *Dwipada*, the couplet. There is hardly any Yaksha Gaanaa in which the dwipada meter is not employed. The common notion that dwipada is a desi meter is not true, it is found even in Vedic literature. The Sangeeta Ratnaakara mentions the characteritics of dwipada in ch.4 verse 214-217. Various kinds of dwipada are employed in Yaksha Gaanaa and this process uninterruptedly continues in almost all the Kuchipudi dance dramas even today.

Examples:
In a Yaksha Gaanaa entitled Lilavati Kalyaanam of Giriraja, we find a manjari dwipada:

Ea reetiga dharaneesudu vedalina
saari vaarta tama chaarulache vini
verachiyu veruvani vithamuna vimatulu
gurigala tama tama kulagatu lennuchu.....

Another variety of dwipada is normally used in Kuchipudi and Bhagavata Mela dance dramas:

In Prahlaada Naatakam of Kuchipudi:

Padapadi prathama sambhavamuna dịtiki
vidita paraakramaanvita dheerulaguchu....

The Prahlada Charitra in the Bhagavata Mela begins with a dwipada:

Paatiga pada gadya padyaadulamara
naatakambugajesi navarasaaloluka...

Another component of Yaksha Gaanaa structure is *Padyam*, the verse. Both the desi and margi meters are employed by the authors of Yaksha Gaanaas and this is followed scrupulously by the composers of Kuchipudi dance dramas from the days of Siddhendra Yogi till today. But the real reflection of the Yaksha Gaanaa characteristics in the

Kuchipudi dance dramas lie in the *Artha Padyaas*, the half verses like the *Seesaarthams* and the *kandaarthams*. The first half of these verses run as verses and the later halves run to rhythm as a daruvu.

Example:

The following kandaartham is from a traditional Yaksha Gaanaa entitled Lakshmi Naraayana Vilasamu jointly authored by two poets , Daruvuri Appalaachaaryulu and Vaaranaasi Achyutarama Kavi:

Suralu dharaasurulu dharaa
dharulu dharaavarulu naatma taruneeyutulai
sura nadini munigi panktula
niravandaga nanta kaanta
limpalaraaran
kempu chekkadala dorampu pallemula va
ddimpa saagiri melampu nerpu maata..... limpala raaran

It is a practise in some of the Yaksha Gaanaa to prescribe the names of raaga and taala to the kandaarthams. The one illustrated above is prescribed to be sung in Jayantasena, ata taalam. If we examine the kandams and kandarthams in the Kuchipudi repertoire, it proves that there is a very great impact of the Yaksha Gaanaa structure on them.

An example of a kandaartham from Bhaamaa kalaapam:

taalam : misra chaapu

Erupagayunnee dustula
raarammani piluva padma raagamunagalan
korina vanniyu niccheda
maaraamulu jeyakipudu maadhavu temma
maryaada gaadani maadhavi yanuma
arkuni koorimi aadivaarapu sommu
haranambuliccheda nalavaanu goni temmu

Significantly we find that only Taalam is mentioned for this kandaartham.

Examples of some poems:

1.The ending poem of the famous letter of Satyabhama to Sri Krishna is a Kandam;

Chittajuni baarikorvaka
Tattara padi vraasinaanu tappo oppo
Chittamuna kopa menchaka
ittari brovanga raave iviye pranatul

Other meters like *Mattakokila, taruvoja, layagraahi, utsaaha, maalini,* etc., which are used in Yaksha Gaanaas are freely used both in the Kuchipudi and the Bhagavata Meladance dramas.

In Yaksha Gaanaa we find many prose lines for the purpose of linking the lyrics and in conversations. This tradition is also adhered to in the Kuchipudi & Bhagavata Mela Natakams. There are afew varieties of them; *Choornika, Kaivaaram, Vinnapam* etc. While choornikas normally contain only Sanskrit, kaivaaram is a prosaic composition usually used at the begining of the dance drama immediately after the naandi padyam or the introductory verse and contains eulogy with lot of Sanskrit compounds.

Example:
1.In the Prahlaada Naatakam :

anarghya ramnee ramaneeya kireetakundalaanga......

2. In the same dance drama:

Kasyapa jathara vaaraasi nisaakaraa paraak...

The most significant part of any Yaksha Gaanaa is the lyrics. Though a particular variety of compositions were used in the ancient Yaksha Gaanaas, their impact is very dilute in the present-day dance dramas. Inspite of the fact that there is a metrical difference in these compositons, still they come under the infinite category of lyrics enunciated by the aalankirikaas and are structurally within the parameters of the Yaksha Gaanaa literature. Even among the modern day dance dramas, we find *yela, laali, jola* and afew other varieties of compositions found in the ancient Yaksha Gaanaas.

Examples:

1. A laali song from a traditional Yaksha Gaanaa entitled Seeta Kalyaanam of Agastyaraju Ramana:

laali bangaru bomma laali maayamma
laali muddulagumma laali seetamma....

Another feature frequently employed in the Yaksha Gaanas is the conversational lyrics, the *samvaada geyaas.* We find these in abundance in almost every Kuchipudi dance drama.

Examples:

1. A daruvu in khamaas,from the Bhamaa kalaapam depicts the conversation between Satyabhama and Sri Krishna:

Krishna: *karpoora gandhi to kaliyuta ledani*
nippu laina batteda
Satya: *kaaru chicchu batti kabalinchu vaaniki*
nippu lanaga nentaraa

Just as we consider Siddhendra Yogi as the trendsetter for the Kuchipudi dance, the same can be said of Melatturu Venkatarama Satry for the Bhagavata Mela dance dramas. He is said to be a contemporary of Tyagaraja and is said to have composed 12 dance dramas of which some are not available. It is significant that his dance dramas are also almost revolve round the same plots as those found in the Kuchipudi tradition, like Prahlaada Charitra, Usha Parinayam, Rukmini Kalyaanam, Seeta Kalyaanam etc. All these commence with a Kandam followed by a Dwipada.

There are pravesika daruvus for the main characters and the prominent meters are used in them. There are daruvus employed for depicting other situations also apart from the pravesika daruvu as is the case with the Kuchipudi tradition. Almost all aspects of Yaksha Gaanaas are found in the composition of these dance dramas. It is also note worthy that just as in Kuchipudi tradition, in this tradition also, men play the female roles.

There are two different versions in vogue as explanation for these striking similarities between the Kuchipudi dance and the Bhagavata Mela tradition. While some critics say that the Melatturu

Bhaagavatulu migrated from Kuchipudi village and hence the similarities, others are of the opinion that Kuchipudi dancers borrowed some of the features from the Bhaagavatamela tradition. But a careful look would lead us to accept both the arguments. Both the traditions followed the Yaksha Gaana structure and so look alike and there are evidences to prove that Kuchipudi Bhagavatulu did migrate to Achyutapuram in Tanjore kingdom. It is also true that Kuchipudi dancers borrowed in due course the sabdam from the Melattur Bhagavata Mela tradition.

Some of the rakti raagaas employed in Yakshagaanaas are: Mukhari, Dhanyasi, Bhairavi, Todi, Kaanada, Kambodi, Saurashtra, Bhoopalam, Saaveri, Regupti, Bilahari, Naata, Aarabhi, Madhyamaavati, Pantuvaraali, Janjhoti, etc.

Critics have conclusively proved that most of these ragas are employed in both Kuchipudi and Bhagavatamela tradition. A list of ragas employed by Melattur Venkatarama Sastry runs like this: Aahiri, Mukhari, Bilahari, Useni, Mohana, ananda Bhairavi, Nilambari, Punnagavaraali, Pantu Varaali, Surati, Kalyani, Devagandhari, Madhyamavati, Begada etc.

In the Kuchipudi tradition we find the following ragas used freqently: Nata, Mohana, Saurashtra, Aarabhi, Khamas, Madhyamavati, Aanandabharavi, Todi, Kambhoji, Mukhari, Pantuvarali, Devagandhaari, etc.

If we take the dance steps of the Yaksha Gaanaa and look at how they have influenced the Kuchipudi and Bhagavata Mela traditions, we find that in all these the Natyasastra plays an important role but nevertheless, we find a lot of desi style in all the three. This is because of the dominant impact of the Yaksha Gaanaa on these two traditions, even before it attained classical stature. The tradition of Yaksha Gaanaa thus influenced both the Kuchipudi and Bhagavata Mela traditions and continues to do so to this day.

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Yakshagana as a Temple Theatre

Prof. M. L. Samaga

All art forms in the world have their basic origin in religion. But in their growth various art forms like, song, dance, painting, sculpture etc., have developed in different dimensions beyond the domain of religious practices. This evolution of art can easily be understood if we make a historical study of various art forms including theatre. Theatre in Greece, England, India and other countries is closely related to man's celebration of religion. The modern theatrical performances have their roots even in primitive religions and religious institutions like *Yajna* and worship in temple.

Yakshagana, in its present form, is a unique and complex traditional performing theatre of Karnataka. Research speculations, based upon limited authentic evidences, have interpreted and described the term 'Yakshagana' variously, in relation to different times and regions. Of course, etymologically, it means 'the song' *(gaana)* of *'Yakshas'*. But, the problem is in identifying the Yakshas. Are they a certain community of singers? *'Jakkalu'*? If so, it means, typical style of singing of certain community. Yakshagana also stands for a form of versification, a composition of narrative poetry. In the traditional song-texts *(prasangas)* of Kannada Yakshagana, poets say in the introductory verses that they write the Puranic story in *'Yakshagana Prabandha'* form. Yakshagana poetic compositions have their own expected features of metre and prosody varieties *(chandas)*. It is believed that these compositions were sung in temples during the worship, as one of the *'sevas'* to the god. Further, typical Indian psyche like to trace the origin of Yakshagana to the mythological beings called *'Yakhas'*. The term *'Yaksha'* also implies worship- *'pooja'* (*Yaksha- 'poojaayam'* -Dictionary). On the whole, considering all these interpretations of Yakshagana, we can conclude that it has strong religious background and is a kind of 'less religious' but 'more artistic' art form, offered as a *'seva'* in the temple or an offering to the temple deity.

Dr. Shivarama Karanth (one of the pioneers in making scholarly study of Yakshagana of coastal Karnataka) called his research work *'Yakshagana Bayalata'*. In fact, till the academic study of Yakshagana in the second half of 20th century, this theatre was more popularly known as *Bayalaata, Aata, Dashavataara aata*. In the past, they were performed in 'open field' *('bayalu')*. Perhaps what was originally close to temple or 'inside the temple in some form' must have moved to the open field. (A similar movement of British drama is seen from church to theatre). The present popular label 'Yakshagana' to the theatrical performance in the Coastal Karnataka is of recent origin. However, this term has come to stay. Some critics, considering the complex evolution of composite Yakshagana, would like to differentiate it from other *'Bayalaata'* forms (*Doddaata, Sannaata, Krishna paarijaata*, etc.) prevalent in Northern part of Karnataka and also from *Moodalapaaya* (Eastern style) Yakshagana found in eastern Karnataka. Of course, the theory of common Dravidian theatre in South India will explain many of similarities found in different South Indian theatrical art forms. Let us not forget that among all South Indian Temple theatres, Yakshagana stands different as it has quite a few unique artistic features. [A detailed discussion of these features is beyond the purview of this essay.]

Before we discuss Yakshagana as a Temple Art, let us briefly know the form and purpose of Yakshagana. Resembling, in many respects, South Indian theatres like *Kuchipudi Yakshagana, Therukoothu, Melather Bhagavata Mela, Kathakkali* etc., Yakshagana, structurally, consists of powerful music, vigorous dance, colourful costumes and extempore speech. A well proportioned harmonious blend of these four forms of *Abhinaya* (as described in N*atyashastra*) is a unique feature of this theatre. In its present form of traditional evolution, Yakshagana combines classical discipline with folk liberty. It is a synthesis of dance and drama). In other words, flexibility and adaptability being its hallmarks, Yakshagana is a complex popular living theatre in the Western part of Karnataka.

Yakshagana is a whole-night performance. After the *poorvaranga(Sabhaalakshana)*, which comprises mainly invocatory

dances in praise of Gods like, *Ganapathi, Krishna, Subrahmanya,* a puranic story is presented till the morning. The purpose of Yakshagana is religious in nature. It is a medium of moral instruction or informal ethical education combined with entertainment. It is in the *vaachikaabhinaya*- intellectual extempore dialogues that we get the interpretation of mythological stories and characterisation of mythological beings. The beauty sometimes lies in the contemporary significance added to the ancient stories. It is not just a 'narrative-theatre'. It is also mainly an 'interpretative-theatre', interpretation through all four forms of *Abhinaya.*

There are two styles of Yakshagana, namely the Northern Style *(Badaguthittu)* and the Southern Style *(Thenkuthittu).* The differences are in the style of music, dance and costume.

The temple association of Yakshagana can be examined from two angles: from the point of veiw of internal structure of Yakshagana and from the point of view of theatrical organisation or logistics of performance.

Many researchers like, Dr. Shivarama Karanth, Dr. Chinnappa Gowda, Dr. Amritha Someshwara have discussed resemblances between Yakshagana and local ritual worships like *Naagamandala, Bhootakola, Vaishnava* cult of Udupi. Yakshagana is fundamentally a 'ritualistic theatre'. The performing troupes are either attached to or sponsored by temples. At present nearly forty troupes *(Melas)* bearing the names of different temples travel daily from place to place and perform in night. Yakshagana is regarded as a kind of offering *(seva)* to God, for the fulfilment of certain wish. That is, a devotee prays to God for a particular blessing (getting issues, getting married etc.). He will take vow to perform the Yakshagana of the troupe of that temple. [*Puthrakamesti* story for getting issues, for example.] Accordingly, he offers Yakshagana seva, either after getting the divine benefit or before, hoping to be blessed by the god. Such performances are called *'Harake Aata'.* These days the number of *Harake Aata seva* has increased so much that performances for the next 25 years are booked for some famous troupes. With increasing exhibitionist attitude of the society,

the *Harake Aatas* of Kateel Sri Durgaparameshwari Temple (near Mangalore) or Mandarti Sri Durgaparameshwari Temple (near Udupi) are celebrated like religious festivals with all pomp and grandeur. Generally these shows are in devotee's village. Such *'Harake Yakshaganas'* are, in many respects, extension of temple activity. The presiding deity of the troupe- Lord Ganapathi, travels along with costumes and other necessary paraphernalia of the troupe to all the places where the performance takes place. There will be *Ganahoma* or *Chandikahoma* in the day time in that place (Not always). Depending upon the financial ability of the sponsor-devotee, the relatives and friends are fed with *'Annasantharpane'* (offering of holy food, *Bhojana*). In the evening, in a procession, *Ganapathi* is taken to the green room, erected for that day, and devotees take *'teertha prasaada'* after the evening *pooja* in the green room *('chauki')*.

Yakshagana performance falls into two parts: (i) *Poorvaranga (Sabhaalakshana)* and (ii) *Kathaa* (story). Before the *poorvaranga* begins, Ganesha is worshipped with an *aarati* (waving the light) in the green room and the musicians seek blessings and get permission from the *archaka* (priest). Then they enter the *rangasthala* (stage) with a holy lamp. During the *poorvaranga* dances, at one stage, the Ganesh idol, brought from the green room to the stage by the priest, is worshipped by the *Baalagopala* dancers, as the Bhagavat sings prayer songs. Again when the *Streeveshas* (Lady dancers) dance to the songs praising love sports of *Sri Krishna*. [These roles resemble love-sick gopikas of the *Bhagavata purana*], *Vidushaka-Hogalike Haasya*, resembling the *Sutraadhaara* of Sanskrit plays, praises all the deities, including the local deities of the place of performance. The Bhagavat recites some Sanskrit verses in praise of these Gods, when the play ends in the morning, *prasada* is given to the sponsor-devotee either on the stage or in the green room when concluding *pooja* takes place. (Generally, pooja is simple in form, the main item being *Aarati*-waving light to the God). One of the concluding prayer songs, sung by the Bhagavat as he returns from the stage to the green room in the morning, says 'open the door, for Rama and Krishna are coming back'. It should be remembered that, at the beginning of the play in the evening, we see two *Baalagopala veshas* dancing, of course, praising

Ganesha. It is intepreted that these two are Balarama and Krishna and night's performance is the stories of Lord Krishna in different *avataaras.* (Yakshagana troupe is also called *'Dashaavataaramela')*

As in the case of important temple festivals or rituals, the season of Yakshagana performances each year begins on an auspicious day (in the case of some temple troupes, on a fixed day of a certain month of the Hindu Calendar) and ends on a fixed day. Lord Ganapathi of the troupe will be kept in the temple and in some temples he is worshipped separately daily along with other deities.

On the starting day of the year's season, before the performance commences on the stage, the musicians and *Baalagopala Veshas* go the temple where temple priest gives *'gejje'* or anklet bells to these actors after the prayer to the God. Then they dance in the temple and then only they go to the green room with the *prasaada.* The first performance and the last performance of the troupe is in front of the temple and is called *'Seva' ('Devara seve.)*

Though the troupes bear the names like *`Sri Kateelu Durgaparameshwari Kripa Poshitha Yakshagana Mandali', 'Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara Kripa Poshita Yakshagana Mandali',* the performances are not inside the temple precincts as in the case of *Krishnanaattam* or *Kudiyaattam* of Kerala. The performance is outside and in front of the temple. Sometimes, certain religious beliefs have also influenced Yakshagana. In Kateel presiding deity of the temple is *Devi,* the Mother Goddess. *Devi Mahaatme* story is not performed in Kateel. In another village called 'Kepu', where it is believed that mother Goddess wanders in the night wearing anklet-bells, the Yakshagana dancers do not wear *'gejje'* while dancing. These are some temple-beliefs respected by god-fearing Yakshagana artistes.

Though Yakshagana, a temple theatre, is travelling in its external organisation, it is performed always in front of the temple, in a certain village. There is a village called *Gundubaala,* near Honnavara of Uttara Kannada district, Karnataka. Hanuman Temple here is very famous. Yakshagana Seva is offered everyday by one or the other

devotee and every day play is performed in front of the temple, on the stage facing God. This is not a travelling troupe. The *Rangasthala* is treated as a holy place as in temple and sometimes audience come and touch the *rangasthala* to be blessed by God. In some South Indian temples, theatrical performance also finds a place in the list of *Sevas* (offerings), hung on the wall. (Guruvayoor temple, for example). But not so in the case of Yakshagana.

With the commercialization of Yakshagana after 1930s, the 'tent troupes', with the intention of attracting and entertaining the audience, have added other dimensions to this theatre. They are ticketed shows. More secular motifs have entered the theatre. As a result, the aura of piousness associated with Yakshagana has been damaged. With them Yakshagana is like a product to be sold. But these troupes also bear the names of temples. However, in the recent years commercialized Yakshagana has been losing its charm and again the movement is towards sponsored or patronized performances.

Kateelu and Dharmasthala troupes are under direct control of respective temples. All the properties like costumes are given by the temple management and they only decide the salary of the artistes. The manager has to pay some firxed amount to the temple fund for each performance. Some other troupes do not get such rich support fromtemples. Temples don't have control over 'tent-troupes' (ticketed performances), though they have lent names to the troupes.

As the traditional attitude is thinning out in our society, temple Yakshaganas have shown a new development. Instead of showing the traditional mythological stories, the *Sthala purana* stories connected with respective temples are performed. These stories, quite often, are a blend of history, legend and fiction. Local deiteis, the gods *'parivara devatas'*, contemporary human beings etc., all come as characters. The mass among the audience find more novelty and entertainment in such stories. Since it is a *Seva-pooja* to the temple god, the devotees prefer temple stories like *Kateelu Kshetra Mahatme, Dharmasthala Kshetra Mahatme, Mandarthi Kshetra Mahatme.* This trend has seen many advantages to temple-troupes. The bond between the temple and

devotees is strengthened through Yakshagana. Performances can afford newness of entertainment value. Since most of the temple deities appear on the stage, the performance gains temple-festival atmosphere. The poets who write poems for such stories get more liberty to exercise their fictional talents. Artists also are happy as they find vent to their talents including folk talents.

However, this trend is regretted by the connoisseurs because serious intellectual discussion of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavata* etc. are slowly vanishing. Traditional costumes are also badly damaged in form. Thus, in the last one hundred years, Yakshagana, which was originally a *'Seva'* to the god in the temple, has evolved into a complex as well as artistic theatre. People with religious feeling look at Yakshagana as a 'religious celebration- a *Utsava*'. The masses look at Yakshagana primarily as a source of entertainment. But the *rasikas,* people with educated artistic taste, look at Yakshagana not mainly as a temple theatre but as a work of art like, *Bharatanaatyam* or *Kathakkali* performance on modern stages with less emphasis on religious motifs. They also agree that Yakshagana is a 'total theatre' bearing the main features of theatre as described in *Naatyashastra*.

From the Secular to the Sacred:

On the Aesthetics of Kutiyaattam

K. G. Paulose

Kutiyaattam, which U N E S C O proclaimed as the intangible heritage of humanity, preserves the unique characteristics of traditional theatre of Kerala. It is, perhaps, the lone surviving vestige of the ancient Indian theatrical experiments.[1]

1. Naatyasaastra, The Grammar of Theatre (2.c. BCE)

Bharata, in his encyclopaedic Naatyasaastra, prescribes a code of conduct for playwrights and actors. He drew inspiration from his experience as an actor and also from the rich tradition he inherited. He wanted to distance himself from the populist mode of presentations prevailed at that time.[2]To achieve this, he took the performance from streets to the well-guarded theatre-houses, wherein admission was limited to a few hundred spectators, mostly belonging to the higher strata of the society. Secondly, he introduced a kind of stylised acting (naatyadharmi) along with the realistic (lokadharmi) mode of the popular theatre. The appreciation of naatyadharmi required high scholarship and specialised training. The connoisseur had to use his imaginative faculty and finer sensibilities to understand the performance. The third and crucial contribution of Bharata was thestress he gave to saatvikaabhinaya. This enabled him to focus on the aesthetic emotion of the spectators and to develop the wonderful theory of rasa[3]. All the components in a performance are intended to develop the rasa. This concentration on rasa and bhaava elevated theatre to a sublime level. Spectactors were taken to a trans-temporal world, where the supreme bliss they enjoyed was akin to the supreme bliss the yogis experience.

Bharata's theatre, later on, had its varied manifestations in different parts of the country. The broader relations between maargi and desi on the one hand and the interrelations between desis themselves marked the growth of Indian theatre in its different phases of evolution. Kuttanimata (8 c.)[4] contains a graphic description of the

enactment of the first Act of Ratnaavali, which gives glimpses of the improvisations on Bharata for over a thousand years. The claim of the director that this method excelled the traditional one handed down by Bharata, need not be dismissed as an exaggeration. Kashmir had close cultural relations with Kerala from ancient times[5]. The developments in Kashmir had its immediate impact in the Southern-most tip of the peninsula. The actors of Kerala were familiar with the Kuttanimata experiment. The greatest development in Kashmir around this time was the doctrine of dhvani propounded by Anandavardhana in his Dhvanyaaloka. Ananda had to face stiff resistance in his homeland. But Kerala accepted him whole-heartedly and introduced his innovative ideas of dhvani immediately, in theatre. This was a landmark in the history of Kerala theatre.

Naatyasaastra had its influence in the South from a very early period. Though the Vidhya mountains divided this country as Aaryaavarta in the North and Dakshinaapatha in the South, it never prevented cross-cultural currents in these segments. Bharata himself refers to Andhras, Dramilas and other inhabitants of the South. Tolkappiyam was strongly influenced by Naatyasaastra. Silappadikaram provides a mine of information regarding performance traditions prevailed at that period. The thematic area of its operation extends to the whole of South India. The story spreads to three important cities of the South - Madurai, Kaverippoompattinam and Kotungalloor. It was in Kotungalloor in Kerala that the Parayur Kuttachakkiyan exhibited his unusual talent by presenting the turbulent thaandava by the right part of the body and the sober lasya by the left simultaneously, thereby playing the dance of Ardhanaareeswara. This tradition was developed after a few centuries by a royal dramatist who ruled Kerala with his capital in the same city, Mahodayapuram – the present Kotungalloor.

2. The Vyangyavyakhya (09.c.CE)

King Kulasekhara wrote two dramas taking the stories from the Mahabharata[6]. He did not have much appreciation of the conventional

method of presenting Sanskrit dramas that prevailed at that time. The laymen among the audience enjoyed the plain speaking. What about the scholars? They knew the story already. The stage presented nothing new to satisfy their intellectual or emotional thirst. He was thinking of a method of acting that will endear the elite. It was then that he heard of dhvani expounded in Kashmir. Of course, Anandavardhana did it for poetry. Excited, he decided to apply this to theatre. He called the scholars and actors around him and explained to them his innovative idea. He donned the role of each character and demonstrated the way to bring out the hidden meaning. Naturally, they too were attracted to the new method. Thus an innovative improvisation was designed to present Sanskrit dramas in Kerala by the end of the 9th c. CE. This was not then known to the outside world. Kerala, thus deviated from the national tradition of Naatyasaastra.

The method by which Kerala deviated from the national stream was two-fold: application of dhvani and retrospective narration. There was nothing new in the story to attract the audience. What they expected from a performance was the interpretation of the silence of the author. The actor had to bring out the silence hidden in the text. It was the suggestive import that transformed the *page to stage.* For instance, in Subhadraadhananjaya, the vidushaka enters asking for alms – bhikshaam datta. He pretends to be hungry and communicates it to the audience through four-fold acting. All are pleased. It is not over. Concentrating his attention on the elites in the front row, he informs them that what he seeks is not food, but a maiden. This is suggested by the feminine gender in bhikshaa. Subhadra is in love with Dhananjaya, his friend. We are here to seek her hand for Arjuna. This is the suggested sense here.

This suggested sense cannot be communicated verbally as it is not in the text. The actor has to create a sub-text from his imagination. Imagination knows no bounds. So the actor can take it to any extent. This revolutionary step liberated the actor, for the first time, from the

dramatic text and permitted a free-play on stage. The second point relates to the medium of communicating the hidden meaning. Kulasekhara prescribed netraabhinaya – the movement of eyes. It is a silent interaction between the the actor and the elite. Both need to be imaginative – the actor to present and the elite to receive.

The other radical innovation of Kulasekhara was the introduction of retrospective narration. The texts always introduce a character with the introduction - *tatahpravisati,* then the character enters. When? After what? Spectators have a right to know as to what happened before his/her entry. So every character has to establish his/her present status narrating the previous incidents up to the textual context. This is purvasambandha – connecting the past to the present. The actor now is confronted with a serious problem. How to narrate effectively the incidents related to other characters without verbal communication? Here we have an exhilarating new experience. He permits the actors to transform their roles! Arjuna meets Uloopi. She is enchanted by the handsome youth. How to express her feelings? The actor in the guise of Arjuna transforms himself to Uloopi. Strange indeed! This is the technique of Pakarnnaattam - transformation of roles. These two radical experiments - dhvani and purvasambandha – had far-reaching consequences on Kerala stage. Presentation of inner meaning took a lot of time. Hence it became practically impossible to present a play in full. Kulasekhara insisted on one act in one night. There too only one verse need be taken up for elaboration.

When actor became free from the text, he took more time to please the elite. He got ample opportunities to exhibit his histrionic talents. Gradually the text and author were forgotten. The multi-character play, in effect, was transformed to a solo performance. Bharata's theatre, thus, became an actor's theatre.

3. Localisation of a national tradition (12-14 c.CE)

Kulasekhara had a finer aesthetic sense. This is reflected in all his innovations. Many of his successors failed to imbibe the same spirit. Moreover, his refined stage was confined to his capital and its surroundings. The powerful Northern settlement did not approve him[vii]. The tradition there was more logo-centric as is evident from the champus and other literary works. This Chellur tradition was not friendly with the Mahodayapuram practices due to political reasons[viii]. After the fall of Chera Empire (12.c.CE) both the streams got merged. The eloquent silence of Kulasekhara was mixed up with the loquacious verbosity of the North. The emergence of Malayalam language became a good excuse for the protagonists of Chellur. The nanaaloka – laymen – claimed a larger share. All these were at the cost of the aesthetics of Kulasekhara. These developments brought a sea-change on the Kerala theatre. Malayalam language was introduced to the Sanskrit stage. Vidushaka's role was inflated beyond limits. His humour, wit and criticism endeared him to the masses. He occupied the centre-stage pushing back even the hero of the play.

The indigenous practices prevailed in Kerala also influenced the performance at this stage. Many found a place on stage adding spectacle to the whole performance. Malayalam language used by Vidushaka and the home-grown practices virtually localised the national tradition of Bharata's theatre.

4. Temple Theatre (14-15 c. CE)

Historical period in the South began by 3rd c. BCE, the sangham age. At that time Kerala was an integral part of Tamizhakam. The first wave of settlement of Brahmins here goes back to this age. The second wave, more powerful, was during the Chalukya period, 7-8th centuries of Common Era. With the emergence Chera Empire (9-12 c. CE) these settlements came to acquire more importance. A significant development of this period was the emergence of temples in the place of village shrines known as kavus. A new form of agamic worship under the guidance of Brahmin priests came into force centred round

the temples. These temples were not only places of worship but also of art, culture and everything related to the social life including land and property[ix]. When temples grew in size the importance and number of functionaries also increased. This gave birth to a new sub-caste, ambalavasi, temple servants. The Brahmins entered into alliance with them as also with the sudras. They prevailed upon the ruling class also by conferring on them the status of kshatriya. The Brahmins thus formed a grand alliance between themselves and ruling class on the one hand and between themselves and the lower class on the other[x]. The tenants had already come under their control. The impact of this grand alliance was tremendous. It brought out basic changes in the social fabric of the land. There was a progressive secularisation of the Brahmin community. Most of them concentrated primarily on worldly affairs; only a small fraction continued Vedic studies. Simultaneously, the indigenous groups were progressively sanskritised resulting in the imposition of a priestly Brahmin authority on a secular society. Consequently a large number of temple servants belonging to the Varier, Pishaaroti, Potuvaal, Chaakyaar and Nampyaar sub-castes acquired proficiency in Sanskrit language and literature.

Attached to the temples there were salai and theatre, the former to cater to the need of education and the latter for singing, dancing, acting and storytelling. Scholars were appointed in temples to recite regularly stories from Mahabharata. This atmosphere dominating the social arena of this age enhanced the demand for and prestige of Chaakyaars, Nangyaars and Nampyaars[xi]. Separate institutions evolved around each of them.The decline of the centralised authority of the Cheras and the breakdown of the unity provided by Sanskrit due to the emergence of local languages hastened the process of amalgamation. The 12th and 13th centuries witnessed the realisation of this transformation. In these circumstances the Sanskrit theatre moved to the temple premises by the end of the 14th century. Separate theatre-houses began to be constructed attached to important temples.

5. Over-ritualisation (14-20 c. CE)

The immediate effect of this shift of space was two-fold: editing of dramatic texts and over-ritualisation of theatre. The texts and their contents had to be modified to suit the devotional atmosphere of the holy place. Certain parts had to be curtailed. Buddhist characters like Rumanvan were eliminated. Devotional portions were added. It was this atmosphere that gave prominence to Ramayana stories. Ascharyachoodaamani was preferred to Abhinjaanasakuntala[xii].

Another effect of the space-shift was the over-ritualisation of theatre. Drama was considered to be a visual sacrifice. Bharata had prescribed rituals in the beginning. But rituals and ceremonies got a greater role in performance. The performance of Kutiyattam at this stage had three distinct parts:

a) Preliminaries in the form of rituals
b) The retrospective narration (solo)
c) Enjoining to act the dramatic text.

The details regarding the ritual practices are given below:

Before the performance begins, the Chaakyaar takes a purificatory bath in the pond attached to the temple. Then he moves to the green-room and pays obeisance to the gods and preceptors. The main priest of the temple bestows his blessings on the actor and gives him a piece of consecrated cloth and a ring made of grass leaves. The lamp on the stage is lit with the wick brought from the sanctum sanctorum. The Nampyaar takes his seat behind the mizhavu, sounds the drum and thus announces the performance. The Nangiar, seated on the right side of the stage recites verses praising Ganapati, Siva, and Saraswati to the drumming of the mizhavu. This is known as goshti. The Nampyaar now comes forward, recites the benedictory verse and sprinkles the stage with holy water.A small curtain is held for the preliminary ritual dance. The sutradhaara enters and standing back to the stage performs the ritual dance behind the curtain. When the curtain is removed, he turns around and faces the audience with a pleasant look. Then he dances taking the conventional five steps

(panchapadavinyaasa). He opens his hands which are laden with imaginary flowers and offers to the gods. He goes on to symbolically enact a propitiatory ceremony by offering flowers and water, offers celestial Ganga water to the conch and sprinkles the stage with holy water. He then worships Ganapati and Saraswati. In a pleasant mood he proceeds to the stage and observes the learned scholars waiting for the performance. Paying respects to them he recites the introductory verse and enacts its meaning with gestures.

This is followed by a series of pure dance forms, known as nityakriya. The dances are interspersed with prayers to the deities by the Nangyar. The dances are in different charies. This is followed by a tip to toe description - kesaadipaadavarnana - of Siva and Parvati. There is then a long (14 verses altogether) propitiation to the lords of eight quarters. It ends with the praise to Indra and flowers are offered to all the beings - celestial, terrestrial and netherworlds.

The steps for nityakriya are rigidly structured and the actor is not free to make any changes. It is performed by the actor prior to his transformation to the character. After all these rituals the main character enters. Nityakriya dance is done even in the midst of the performance which has come under severe criticism from the author of Natankusa.[xiii]

6. Naatyasaastra and Kutiyaattam

Kutiyattam follows the principles of Naatyasaastra, yet it is different from it. The most important deviation is in the mode of presentation.

1) Bharata's primary concern was natya. Kutiyattam transforms natyam into aattam (dance). Natya is prose, dance makes it poetic.
2) Bharata conceived a multi-character stage. Kutiyattam prefers solo performance. Kutiyattam developed Kulasekhara's purvasambandha to nirvahana. This solo acting provides the most exciting moments to the connoisseurs.

3) Imaginative acting hinted by Bharata is fully developed in Kutiyattam. Bharata does not permit multiple impersonations - pakarnnaattam, but in Kutiyattam it gives the most exhilarating experience.
4) Bharata permits the use of local language in a limited way. Vidushaka in Kutiyattam made the maximum benefit out of it. He monopolised the stage for several days. This enabled him to interact meaningfully withcontemporary life. But Bharata does not give that much freedom to deviate from the original dramatic text to the jester.
5) Bharata prescribes a rigid structure for drama with five sandhis, sixty four sandhyangas, five arthaprakrtis and five avesthas. Kutiyattam prefers a loose and elastic structure.
6) The actor of Bharata is an imitator. He has two more functions in Kutiyattam – that of narrator and interpreter.

7. Period of Renaissance (1960 CE-)

For six centuries (14-20 c. CE) Kutiyaattam remained confined to the holy temples. The Chaakyaar, Nampyaar and Nangyaar alone were allowed to learn and perform the plays in a devotional spirit. This exclusivity was good to the art since they preserved it as kuladharma. But it also caused the art to suffer a kind of isolation since other sections of the society were unconcerned and even ignorant about the details. Temples provided all facilities for these artistes to flourish. The actors were held in high esteem and their status inside the temple-theatre was next only to the chief priest. Even the king and landlord could not utter a word against the actor. This security emboldened the Chaakyaar to criticise the evils in the society. His function was that of the fifth estate in an otherwise closed society. As the society was more or less in a frozen state there was no scope for any radical innovations either in form or in content during this period[xiv].

20th century brought several changes in the social fabric of Kerala. The societal structure which supported the art-form crumbled

down. Kutiyattam was on the verge of extinction. Many in the new generation were not willing to continue the traditional training even as kuladharma. The ancient form was struggling for survival. The actors, at this juncture, dared to take the form back to the public space. They were successful in their endeavour. The public accepted Kutiyattam, which was hitherto inaccessible to them, in good spirit. This became a landmark in the history of the art form. The Kerala Kalamandalam founded by the great poet Vallathol for the promotion of traditional art forms of Kerala opened its doors for Kutiyattam. A department was started in 1965 under the great doyen Painkulam Rama Chaakyaar and admissions were thrown open to all sections of society. A systematic method of training was evolved. A magnificent natyamandapa was constructed providing a public space for performance.

Kutiyattam got a face lift both in appearance and in content. The costumes were fashioned to suit modern taste. Plays were re-edited reducing the duration to a few hours. The aesthetics of the performance and taste of the audience were the prime concerns for these restructurings. Many new promising faces began to appear on stage. The most important phenomenon of this period is the powerful presence of women on stage and the resuscitation of Nangyaarkoothu, the exclusive performance of women.

An important development of this period is the global attention that Kutiyattam has received. Scholars from the West began to turn their attention, even from the sixties, to this wonderful form which was not accessible to them till then. This led the academia in and out, to take up serious research on various aspects of Sanskrit theatre, especially Kutiyattam and its allied forms[xv]. Aesthetic study was a neglected area in the history of Kutiyattam. The entry of Kutiyattam to world theatre movement was the glorious moment for this ancient form. Many theatre activists considered the mode of acting in Kutiyattam, especially the subtle netrabhinaya, as the mother of all

acting. The declaration of this art form as an intangible heritage in 2001 crowned all these accomplishments.

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[1]Kutiyattam is the unique way of presentation of Sanskrit plays developed in Kerala during the 12th and 13th centuries of the Common Era. The term Kutiyattam is a combination of two Malayalam words - kuti (to join)and aattam (acting). It denotes the process of joining others in acting. As will be explained in this chapter, a Kutiyattam performance has three parts - the preliminary rites, retrospective narration and enactment of the dramatic text. Multiple characters appear only in the third part. The word Kutiyattam, therefore, etymologically, refers to the enactment of the dramatic text. The manuals use it in that sense. Yet, it is now used to cover all the three parts and also as a common name for the art-form. Sanskrit texts use only the term naatya.

[2]'Laugh and be merry' (haseti-rameti) was the sole aim of the popular theatre at the time of Bharata. We get an idea of the pre-Bharata theatre from the descriptions in the Jataka tales. Bharata had a higher objective. Though he approved the playfulness (kreedaneeyaka) of theatre, he was conscious of the social function of theatre in upholding high moral concepts.

[3]The greatest contribution of Bharata to theatre is his focus on rasa.The eight permanent and 33 transitory moods cover the entire moments of human life. Focus on rasa motivates the actors to concentrate on the central point of action as also of life.

[4]Kuttanimata is an 8th Century C.E. classical Sanskrit literature written by the Kashmiri poet Damodaragupta.

[5]The great Sankaracharya travelled all the way from Kerala to Kashmir and established his mutt there. Kashmiri poets show close familiarity with Kerala in their descriptions. The Kerala actors quote from Kuttanimata in their narrations.

[6]The dramas were Tapatisamvarana and Subhadraadhananjaya. They were pregnant with implied meaning. He demonstrated the mode of acting bringing out the suggested sense. A scholar recorded the details. This document - Vyangyavyahkya - is the first performance text available to us. Unfortunately it still remained in Mss. The present author is bringing it out with exhaustive notes and translation in English.

[vii]In the North there was a strong Brahmin settlement around Taliparambu from early days. They boast of their inheritance from the legendry Parasurama. The Brahmanic settlement there is centered around the Perumtrkkovil temple. Anadhitimangalam, attributed to be the native place of the vidushaka, belongs to this area and the local temple authorities were fighting each other. The basic reason for the enmity could be the Saiva-Vaishnava feuds of those days. Anyhow, the vidushaka solves it by interpreting a verse to praise Vishnu and Siva alike. This Northen narrative suta tradition merged with the Vyangyavyakhya tradition of Kulasekhara. Suta's narration was imposed on vidushaka. It is interesting to note that the vidushakastobha in the beginning symbolically represents a long journey, the descending of the suta from heaven/Naimisharanya down to the earth. It represents the fusion of the epic narrative tradition of suta with that of the abhinaya tradition of Vyangyavyakhya - a conglomeration of Vaakku(verbal)with Nokku (saatvikabhinaya).

[viii]For more details on Chellur, kindly refer: Kesavan Veluthat, 1978, *Brahmin Settlements in Kerala-Historical Studies*, Calicut University, Sandhya Publications.

[ix]Rajan Gyrukkal. P M, 1992, *The Kerala Temple and the Early Medieval Agrarian System*, Vallathol Vidyapeetom, Sukapuram
[x]Narayanan M G S.1996, *Perumals of Kerala*, University of Kerala, Trivandrum

[xi]Chakyar is the traditional actor of Kutiyattam. Only those who belonged to this community were permitted to perform Kutiyattam when it was confined to temples. There are references to Chakyars in the Sangham literature and in many inscriptions. Silappadikaram refers to the Ardhanreeswara dance of Chaakyaar.
[xii]Abhinjanasakuntala was very much popular in Kerala, as in other parts of the country. It looks strange that Kutiyaattam theatre was unkind towards this masterpiece. Several excuses, all clumsy, are brought forth to justify the exclusion. Recently Sakuntalam in full has been brought out under the guidance of Sri.G Venu. Ascharyachoodamani of Saktibhadra is the most powerful Ramayana play. Along with Pratima and Abhisheka Ramayana story was presented for a full year on the Kutiyattam stage.

[xiii]Paulose K. G., 1993, Natankusa - A Critique of Dramaturgy, Government Sanskrit College, Tripunithura
[xiv]Chakyaars did not include all the Sanskrit plays to their repertory. The most popular among them are:
a) Four Kerala plays - Tapatisamvarana,Subhadradhananjaya,Kalyanasaugandhika, and Aascharyachoodamani
b) The two prahasanas - Mattavilasa and Bhagavadajjukam
c) The thirteen plays ascribed to Bhasa
d) Nagananda
The drama is not fully presented in Kutiyattam. An Act or a portion of it alone will be presented a day. For the sake of convenience the actors have given separate names for each Act which is self-contained in itself. Sakuntalam has recently been added to the repertory.The solo performance of the Chaakyar is known as Chaakyarkoothu or Prabandhakkoothu.The actor interprets in Malayalam stories taken from the epics.The female actors have developed their own solo performance known as Nangyarkoothu.The exploits of Sri Krishna used to be the theme.This was done as a ritual in the temples. Of late, stories from other sources are also taken for presentation and the presence of women on stage is fortunately powerful. Kutiyattam, Prabanthakkoothu and Nangyarkkoothu are now performed on public places as well as traditional temple theatres. Both the actors and the audience are drawn from different strata of society. There was a fear in some quarters when Kutiyattam was taken to public stage that a secular space will do harm to the sanctity of the art form. Experience has proved it wrong. The worldwide recognition has done only good to the art. Attention of Central and State authorities as also of various cultural organisations has enriched both Kutiyattam and the artistes.
[xv]Many enthusiastic scholars have taken up various projects for research in the universities and some commendable dissertations have already come out. The following books are recommended for reference:
1)Manimadhavachakyar, 1996, Natyakalpadrumam (Malayalam), Kerala Kalamandalam, Trichur

2)Rajagopal L. S., 2000, Kutiyattam Prelimineries and Performance, Kuppuswami Sastri Reaserch Institute, Chennai
3)Paulose K. G., 1993, Natankusa - A Critique of Dramaturgy, Government Sanskrit College, Tripunithura
4)Paulose K. G., 2006, Kutiyattam Theatre - The Earliest Living Tradition,Bharatiya Book Corporation, New Delhi
5)Sudha Gopalakrishnan, 2011, Kutiyattam -The Heritage Theatre of India, Niyogi Books, New Delhi

Krishnanattam

A. Purushothaman and A. Harindranath

sauvarnatbhutabhusanojjvalavapuh samvitapitambaro
nilambhodanibho bhujairdhrtagadashamkharipankeruhaih|
bhrajisnurguruvayumandiravirocisnuh sa visnuh svayam
dhrsnurvishvajanopatapaharane kavyam mama khyapayet ||

[With a marvelous appearance adorned by blazing golden ornaments, clad in yellow apparel, resembling the complexion of dark blue cloud, holding a gada, shankha, chakra and padma in His hands, may that Lord Vishnu, adding lusture to Guruvayur kshetra and removing the sorrow of beings all over the universe, bestow fame upon my kavya.] [Manavedan in Avataram, *Krishnagiti*]

Introduction

Place: Krishna Temple, Guruvayur, Kerala, India.
Time: About 10 p.m. in the night.

All pujas are completed and the Sanctum Sanctorum is closed for the day. Inside the temple complex, on the North side, on the floor, a large oil lamp (Kali Vilakku) is lit. On the east side of the lamp, devotees are sitting on the floor facing west, waiting for a performance of "Play of Krishna" (Krishnattam, attam=play) to begin.

Krishnattam (or Krishnanattam[1]) is a temple ritualistic art, performed at Guruvayur Temple as a votive performance by a troupe owned by Guruvayur Devasvam. The performance is based on *Krishnagiti*, a text of shlokas and padams in Sanskrit, composed by Manavedan, the Zamorin King of Calicut, in 1654. Manavedan (born in 1585), who composed another text *Purva Bharata Champu* (1644), has a prominent place among the Sanskrit poets of Kerala[2]. According to his contemporary,

the scholar Narayana Pandita, Manavedan, a devotee of Krishna, was skilled in nataka, tarka and kavya, and was an expert of yoga[3]. In the composition and style of *Krishnagiti*, Manavedan has followed the models given by *Gita Govindam* (Jayadeva), *Narayaneeyam* (Melputtur Narayana Bhattatiri), *Srikrishnavilasam* (Sukumara), *Srikrishnavijayam* (Shankara), *Balabharata* (Agastya Bhatta) and *Bharata Champu* (Ananta Bhatta). In this context, *Krishna Lila Tarangini* composed by Sri Narayana Tirtha in Tamil Nadu deserves special attention. *Krishna Lila Tarangini* has many similarities to *Krishnagiti.*

Krishnanattam, the Malayalam prose translation of *Krishnagiti* by Prof. P.C. Vasudevan Elayath[4] includes a comprehensive introduction *Krishnanattapraveshakam,* as well as a summary of the scenes of each play. An excellent critical article concerning the various aspects of this temple art and its appreciation titled 'Preparing for Krishna' has been published by Dr. Rustom Bharucha[5]. Krishnattam, a book by Dr. Martha Bush Ashton Sikora and Robert P. Sikora[6] summarises the historical development, training of the artists, provides a description of the performances and views of the artists as well as other aspects of Krishnanattam.

Perhaps *Krishnagiti* is a unique composition in Sanskrit in that it presents the complete life-story of Bhagavan Shri Krishna in the chronological order in eight plays, compiling all the major events described in the Tenth and Eleventh Cantos of *Bhagavata, Mahabharata* and *Harivamsha* in slokas and songs.

Krishnagiti is the earliest (1654) composition in Kerala in which the composer prescribed both raga and tala. It is worth noting that *Krishnagiti* predates the trinity of Carnatic music[7]. Manavedan, a noteworthy figure among the pre-Swati Tirunal composers of classical music, brought several unfamiliar ragas like Kanakurunji, Indisha, Pantayiri and Kedarapantu into vogue in *Krishnagiti*[7]. L. S. Rajagopalan in

his essay Krishnattathile Pattu[7] notes that about 30 padams are now sung in ragas different from those specified by Manavedan. Some of the ragas such as Indisha, Kedarapantu, Pantayiri, Samantamalahari and Ghantara Malavam are lost now.

Krishnanattam presents the slokas and songs of *Krishnagiti* as music, dance, and acting in a cycle of eight plays, Avataram, Kaliyamardanam, Rasakrida, Kamsavadham, Svayamvaram, Banayuddham, Vividavadham, and Svargarohanam, performed in eight days. (*akaraka svabavisva* is the mnemonic to remember the names in order.)

Legend

According to a legend[8], Manavedan requested Vilvamangalam Svamiyar to enable him to see Krishna in person. Svamiyar facilitated this request and Manavedan was able to see Krishna playing under an elanji tree. When Manavedan tried to embrace Krishna, the Lord disappeared leaving behind a peacock feather in Manavedan's hand. An idol of Krishna was made using the wood of the elanji tree. (The elanji tree stood at the place where now, the Kuttambalam stands, on the south-east side of the sanctum sanctorum of the Guruvayur Temple). According to the advice of Vilvamangalam, Manavedan composed *Krishnagiti* sitting before the idol. The peacock feather was incorporated in the headgear of Krishna. The headgear was found to suit the heads of all actors performing as Krishna. The actor also used to get 'possessed' on wearing this headgear.

Preliminary Rituals

Kelikottu, the first event of the play, is carried out by playing drums (maddalams), gong (chengala) and cymbals (elathalam) in the evening (at about 6 p.m.) at the East Nada of the temple. This is to inform the people

in the neighborhood about the performance scheduled in the night. A lamp is lit in the makeup room at dusk. Actors (all male) put on their make-up, sitting on the floor, around another lamp lighted from the lamp in the makeup room.

As soon as the daily rituals of the temple are completed and the Sanctum Sanctorum is closed for the day (about 10 p.m.), the Kali Vilakku (An Oil Lamp of the Play) is kept on the ground in front of performance space in the Temple on the North side of the Sanctum Sanctorum. The Kali Vilakku is lit by a Brahmin from the lamp in the make-up room. Stage hands place the musical instruments (drums, gong and cymbals) on the ground behind the Kali Vilakku. The maddalam players touch them respectfully, lift them up, play a couple of beats on both sides to regulate the sound (this is to invoke the nada brahma, the presence of the lord in the form of sound) and hang the instruments around their waists. Then Kelikkayyu is performed using maddalams, chengala and elathalam.

After Kelikkayyu, a colourful rectangular curtain is held behind Kali Vilakku by two stage hands. Then Totayam is performed behind the curtain by the women characters appearing on that day's play. Totayam is a prayer dance performed by the dancers accompanied by music to invoke the blessings of the Lord as well as to honour the performance stage. Totayam is not for the spectators. For Totayam, the lines starting with *Narayana Narakantaka Narakaparayana* in the fifth padam of the play Kaliyamardanam are sung.

All performances begin with the recital of the sloka (quoted at the beginning of this article) starting with *sauvarnatbhuta* as the mangala shloka (Auspicious beginning).

After Totayam it is time for Purappatu, a piece of pure dance choreography. Either Krishna or Balarama or both, or along with other characters, dance with gestures of hand and face and special steps. In

Avataram and Svargarohanam there is no Purappatu. In Kamsavadham, Purappatu is in the middle of the play. In Banayuddham, Purappatu is a breathtaking tableau of Garuda, Satyabhama and Krishna. In Vividavadham there are two Purappatu, first in the beginning (Balarama and wives) and the other after some time (Krishna, Bhima and Arjuna). The characters performing Purappatu for the plays are as follows:
Characters In Purappatu:

- Kaliyamardanam - Krishna, Balarama, Nanda and Upananda
- Rasakrida - Krishna
- Kamsavadham - Krishna and Balarama
- Svayamvaram - Krishna and Balarama
- Banayuddham - Krishna, Satyabhama and Garuda
- Vividavadham - 1. Balarama and wives 2. Krishna, Bhima and Arjuna

Performance

The actors dance and act behind the Kali Vilakku while the singers sing standing behind – this is the general nature of the play. The lead singer sings, playing the gong, the second singer repeats playing the cymbals. Accompanied by shuddha maddalam, toppi maddalam and edakka, both singers sing the slokas and padams of *Krishnagiti* one by one, once. All the slokas and padams of *Krishnagiti* are not used in the performance of Krishnanattam. By tradition many are omitted.

In the performance space, between the singers and Kali Vilakku, the actors dance and act wearing multi-coloured costumes. Dancing and acting in general, do not confirm to the 'text' being sung, but are according to ragas (tunes) and talas (beats).

In Krishnanattam, five types of facial make ups, Pachcha (Green), Pazhuppu (Orange), Kathi (Knife), Minukku and Kari (Black) and masks are used. A Pachcha facial make up is used for Krishna, Vasudeva, Kamsa,

Nandgopa, Uddhava, Muchukunda, Dandavaktra, Rukmi, Arjuna, Jarasandha etc. A Kathi facial make up is used for bad but kingly characters (Shankhachuda in Rasakrida, Shishupala in Vividavadham, Bana in Banayudhham). Incidentally, in Svayamvaram, Shishupala appears as Pachcha. Pazhuppu is for Balarama, Shiva and Bhima. Minukku is for all women, Narada, Sandipani, Yavana, etc. There is no facial make up for Toddy Tapper and Kuchela (Vividavadham). For Yahsoda, Bhumidevi, Radha and Satyabhama green colour is applied on the face and a chutti is provided. In earlier days, Devaki and Rukmini used to have chutti on their face. These were converted to Minukku during the time of A. C. G. Raja[9]. Kari is for Putana (mask - Avataram) and the hunter Jara (Svargarohanam).

In some plays, the same actor appears in different roles. For example, in Svayamvaram the same actor appears as Sandipani and Rukmini. The roles of Dhantavaktra and Satrajit are played by the same actor. The roles of Uddhava, Muchukunda, Shishupala and Rukmi are also played by one actor.

Play – Masks

Colourful masks are used in Krishnanattam[10]: Avataram - Brahma (4 face), Putana (Black), Kaliyamardanam - Bakasura (Bird), Brahma (4 face), Rasakrida - No mask, Kamsavadham - No mask, Svayamvaram – Dharmaraja (Green), Jambavan (white monkey face), Banayuddham - Murasura (5 faces, all different), Narakasura (Red Beard), Ghantakarna (two different Black), Sivabhutas (two different Black) Vividavadham - Vivida (Black) Svargarohanam - Brahma (4 face)

Props

Besides bow, arrow, mace, sword, shield, lance and chakra, Krishnanattam uses many items and props for the performance. To beat

the child Krishna, Yashoda takes a real stick. A doll for the new born baby (Avataram, Svargarohanam), Kaliya in Kaliyamardanam (doll of snake), Ananta of Svargarohanam (doll of seven hooded snake), branch of a real tree (Kaliyamardanam, Vividavadham and Svargarohanam) are some of the props. Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and Bana have artificial arms. Bakasura and Garuda have painted wings. Jambavan, tired by fighting with Krishna, uses a walking stick. Kuchela carries a palm leaf umbrella and walks using a walking stick. In Vividavadham, Yudhishthira washes the feet of Krishna with actual water. Later, Krishna washes the feet of Kuchela. In Svayamvaram, Jambavan and Krishna fight using branches of trees. In Vividavadham, Vivida and Balarama do the same. In Vividavadham, the toddy tapper brings a pot of toddy and packet of pickles to Balarama. Krishna gives a signal to Bhima to kill Jarasandha by tearing a leaf in two halves.

Kailasa in Banayuddham is another beautiful scene. Krishna goes to Kailasa to meet Shiva. As the curtain is taken away, Shiva, Parvati, Subrahmanya and Ganapati are seen. Two small Shivabhutas are also present.

In Svargarohanam, there are two breathtaking scenes of Vaikuntha. In the first scene, Krishna and Arjuna visit Vaikuntha. Vishnu sits with the seven hooded Ananta hovering over his crown, along with Shri Devi, Bhumi Devi, Shiva, Brahma and Narada.

In the last scene of Svargarohanam, Vishnu reclines on Ananta. Shri Devi, Bhumi Devi, Brahma and Narada are present. Shiva and Garuda are on either side. One parsada sits on one side and another parsada on the other. The singers and drummers sit on either side. Several oil lamps are lit in front. Fumes from the burning incense rise up creating an ethereal atmosphere.

Use of Hand-held Curtain

Depending on the situation, the hand-held curtain is used to indicate the temporary and eternal nature of time. While the curtain is used some times to define the location, some other times, the absence of curtain is used to erase the boundaries of the performance stage. The hand-held curtain has a special and significant role in the performance of Krishnanattam[11].

Music

Krishnagiti has 62 padas and 93 padyagitams (musical verses) with specific raga and tala. In addition, there are 321 verses and 2 Dandhakas to be rendered in ragas[7].

Play - Shlokas - Padams – Padyagitams
Avataram - 64 - 14 – Nil
Kaliyamardanam - 49 - 10 – 4
Rasakrida - 57 * - 10 – 27
Kamsavadham - 46 - 7 – 17
Svayamvaram - 30 - 5 – 15
Banayuddham - 28 - 7 – 7
Vividavadham - 23 - 3 – 15
Svargarohanam - 24 - 6 - 8
Total - 321 - 62 - 93
*Two Dandhaka

The mode of singing in Krishnanattam adheres to the sopana style practiced in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Kavalam Narayana Panikker[12] notes that two-line structure of Tyani in Kottipati Seva is basic to the singing in Krishnanattam and Kathakali. Hand and facial gestures are most important in Kathakali for acting the meaning of the words of the text in detail. Thus each line has to be sung by the singer several times to allow

the actor to express the meaning through bhavibhinaya. Since this kind of acting is almost absent in Krishnanattam, the text needs to be sung only once by the lead singer and then repeated by the second singer. Devotion is the essence of Krishnanattam and the Sopana style suits it best.

The ragas used now in Krishnanattam are Ahari, Anantabhairavi, Kanakurunji, Kambhoji, Kalyani, Kedaragaulam, Ghantaram, Todi, Devagandaram, Dwijavanti, Natta, Nattakurunji, Navarasam, Nilambari, Pantuvarali, Pati, Puranir, Bilahari, Bauli, Bhupalam, Bhairavi, Madhyamavati, Mayamalavagaulam, Mukhari, Mohanam, Ragamalika, Yadukula Kambhoji, Varali, Shankarabharanam, Saveri, Sarangam and Saurashtram. The talas used now in Krishnanattam are Atanta, Chempa, Chempata and Panchari. The ragas and talas used now for each padam and padyageetham are listed[13] separately.

Concluding Rituals

Except Svargarohanam, all plays end with Dhanashi. The characters in the last scene of the play perform Dhanashi by dancing in a particular way accompanied by singing the lines starting with *Narayana Narakantaka Narakaparayana* in the fifth padam of the play Kaliyamardanam. The characters performing Dhanashi for the plays are as follows:

Play - Characters performing Dhanashi

- Avataram – Yashoda and two Gopis
- Kaliyamardanam – Krishna, Nandagopa and two Gopis
- Rasakrida - Krishna and two Gopis
- Kamsavadham - Krishna and Balarama
- Svayamvaram - Krishna and Satyabhama
- Banayuddham - Krishna, Pradyumna and Aniruddha
- Vividavadham - Krishna and Rukmini
- Svargarohanam - Nil

As the characters exit from the stage, a sloka is sung as mangalam (Auspicious end). The play is concluded by playing a couple of beats on the maddalam just as in the beginning, signifying the symbolic return of nada brahma from the performance space.

Manavedan has concluded *Krishnagiti* with the following shloka (sung at the end of the play Svargarohanam):

sphayadbhaktibharena nunnamanasa shrimanavedabhida-
ksonindrena krta nirakrtakalirgrahya stutirgathakaih |
laksmivallabha krsnagitiriti vikhyata tavanugraha-
desa puskaralocaneha pathatam pusnatu moksashriyam ||

[Written by the King Manavedan urged on by expanding devotion, removing the ills of Kali, attended to by singers, may this *Krishnagiti*, O the beloved of Lakshmi, O the one with nourishing eyes, by your blessings, grand the opulence of deliverance to those who contemplate this kavya here.]

Votive Offering

Many devotees offer the performance of Krishnanattam at Guruvayur Temple for accomplishing some wish. The list of votive offerings:

Avataram – For the birth of a child
Kaliyamardanam – To offset the effect of poisons
Rasakrida – For well being of unmarried girls and to end quarrels between couples
Kamsavadham – To eliminate enemies
Svayamvaram – For speeding up matrimonial alliances
Banayuddham – For success in legal matters
Vividavadham – To eliminate poverty and obtain prosperity
Svargarohanam – For the peace of a departed soul

Traditionally, the performance of Svargarohanam must be followed up by the performance of Avataram the next day.

A performance of Krishnanattam can be offered as a votive performance at Guruvayur Temple by paying Rs. 2000/= (for each play) to the Administrator, Guruvayur Devasvam, Guruvayur-680101. The troupe also performs outside Guruvayur Temple. For outside performances, the Administrator needs to be contacted for charges. When Svargarohanam is performed outside Guruvayur, traditionally, Avataram is played during the same night up to the part where Mahavishnu appears in his universal form to Vasudeva and Devaki.

Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to Krishnanattam artists for many clarifications. The authors thank Guruvayur Devasvam, Kerala, India for granting special permission to photograph scenes of Krishnanattam inside Guruvayur Temple and Shri Venu Edakkazhiyur who facilitated this process.

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A. Harindranath (harindranath.avaroth@gmail.com)

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[1] For more information, visit http://www.dvaipayana.net/krishnanattam

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[9] Aripra Covialakath G. Raja, "Krishnattom – a Traditional Dance Drama of Kerala" (1988)

[10] Photographs of the masks are available at http://www.dvaipayana.net/krishnanattam/masks/masks.html

[11] Hand-held curtain in Krishnanattam Performance, A. Purushothaman and A.Harindranath, Available at http://www.dvaipayana.net/krishnanattam/tirassila-en.pdf

[12] Bhaktiyute Kala, Kavalam Narayana Panikker, Bhaktapriya, Guruvayur Devasvam, pp. 26-28, November 2001. English translation available at: http://www.dvaipayana.net/krishnanattam/aod.html

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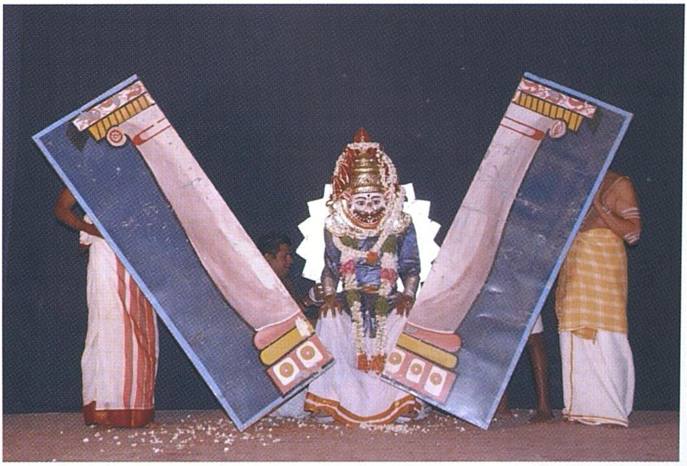
Bhagavata Mela Performances
by
Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam
Snapshots

Prahlada urging Hiranyakashipu to give up enmity with Lord Vishnu (S. Gobi as Hiranya, S. Nagarajan as Leelavati, and B. Soorya as Prahlada)

Harischandra explaining his bad dream to his wife and son (R. Mahalingam as Harischandra, S. Nagarajan as Chandramati, and B. Soorya as Lohidasan)

Kurathi telling Rukmini her prowess in palm reading in Rukmini Kalyanam (S. Anand as Rukmini, M. Swaminathan as Sakhi, and R. Subramanian as Kurathi)

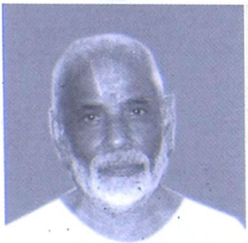
Sakuni cackling at his success at dice while the sad Pandavas watch helplessly in Geetodayam
(R. Mahalingam as Yudhishtira, S. Arvind as Bheema, B. Devnath as Arjuna, M. Swaminathan as Sahadeva, K. Arunachalam as Drona, and S. Gopalakrishnan as Sakuni)



Lord Narasimha's appearance
(P. Ramaswamy as Lord Narasimha)

Musicians, Nattuvanar, and Accompanists
(N. Srinivasan, P. S. Subramanian, Murali Rangarajan, G. Kaliyamoorthy, and B. Devnath in vocals, H. Hariharan as Nattuvanar, and H. Swaminathan in mridangam)

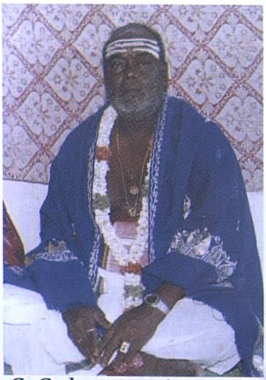
Some Past Bhagavata Mela Artistes



G. V. Ramaswami Iyer

S. Santhanaraman

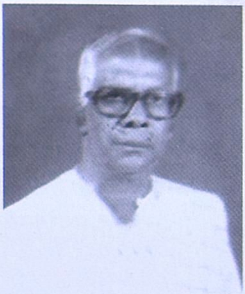
R. Venkataraman



G. Subramaniam

M. Jayasankar

Musicians



L. Venkatesa Iyengar

Thanjavur Sankara Iyer

N. Nataraja Iyer

Lord Narasimha destroying Hiranyakashipu

Krishnattam

Vasudeva, Mahavishnu and Devaki in Avataram. Kali Vilakku is seen in the foreground

Krishna and Bakasura in Kaliyamardanam

Krishna, Radha and Gopis in Rasakrida

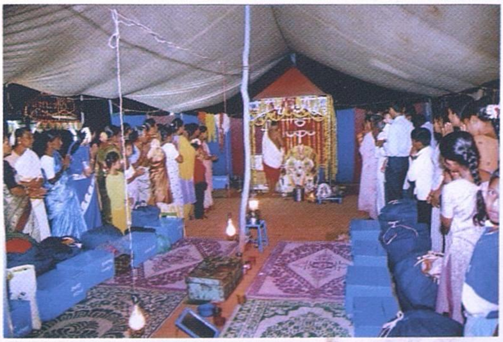
Balarama and Mustika in the foreground, Krishna, Chanura and Kamsa in the background. Play: Kamsavadham

Kailasa scene in Banayuddham

Vaikuntha, last scene of Svargarohanam

Yaksha Gaanam

Gejje (anklet-bells) being given to the dancers by temple priest



Pooja in the green room

Baala Gopala dancers with Ganapati on the Stage

Kutiyattam

Bhagavaddajukam – Kalamandalam Girija and Kalamandalam Shailaja as the Heroine and the Maid

Bali Vadham – Ammannur Madhava Chakyar as Bali, Pothiyil Narayana Chakyar as Angada, and Ammannur Kuttan Chakyar as Sugreeva

Brief Biographies of Authors

Padma Bhushan V. P. Dhananjayan

Padma Bhushan V. P. Dhananjayan, along with his wife Smt. Shanta, is one of the most famous Bharata Natyam dancers to have come from Kalakshetra. He studied Bharata Natyam, Kathakali, mridangam, and music there, and was a leading male dance performer during the time of Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale and Guru Chandu Panicker. They are renowned for their unique presentation of specially conceived duets highlighting the merging of the male and female dance principles. They have traveled the world over to present their art. They impart dance and Indian culture to the youth through their dance school *Bharata Kalanjali.* They have received numerous awards including *Padma Bhushan, Nrithya Ratnakara* (Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana), Live Magazine Achievement Award (Ohio State Academy Award), Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, *Kalaimamani* Award, and *Nritya Choodamani.*

Bharatam R. Mahalingam

Born in 1952 to Shri. Ramalinga Iyer of Melattur, Shri. R. Mahalingam was trained as a Bhagavata Mela artiste from a young age by *Padma Shri* Balu Bhagavatar, *Kalaimamani* P. K. Subbaier, *Kalaimamani* T. G. Bavu Pillai, *Natya Kalanidhi* K. P. Kittappa Pillai, and *Kalaimamani* B. Herambanathan. He debuted as the title character Prahlada in the natya natakam *Prahlada Charitram* in 1964, and has since played all the major male and female lead roles such as Leelavati, Chandramati, Rukmini, Hiranyakashipu, Harichandra, Krishna, as well as many minor roles.From 1985, he has been the artistic director and leader of the Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam. Under his leadership, the Sangam has performed in many places in India, constructed a temple for Lord Lakshmi Narasimha, a permannet auditorium for Bhagavata Mela performances, released two journals on Bhagavata Mela and a book of *Markandeya.* He has trained many young artistes in this rare art. He has been awarded the title *Bharatam,* gold medal by Vipanchee in Chennai, and by the Association for Hindu dharma.

Dr. Murali Rangarajan

Dr. Murali Rangarajan is currently Associate Professor, Center of Excellence in Advanced Materials and Green Technologies, Department of Chemical Engineering and Materials Science, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Coimbatore. He has been one of the vocalists of Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam since 2007. He has composed a few Bhagavata Mela natakams. He was trained in Carnatic Music by *Thirukkodikkaval Papa* Subramania Iyer, a disciple of *Sangita KalanidhiUmayalpuram* Swaminatha Iyer, *Umayalpuram* Venkatarama Iyer, and *Sangita Kalanidhi Semmangudi* Srinivasa Iyer. He also learned from Smt. Annapurni and Sri. Appadurai at Tenkasi, Smt. Sankari Balasubramaniam at Tirunelveli, Sri. Sankaranarayanan at Madurai, and Smt. Ramamani Ramaswami at Karaikudi. He learned Bharata Natyam for ten years from Sri. Natarajan and Ms. Sasikala of Thanjavur, Smt. Indra Krishnamurthy at Tirunelveli, and Sri. Karukurichi Venkatarama Iyer and Sri. Sankararaman at Tenkasi. He also studied Mohiniattam for a year from Sri. Sankararaman. He obtained his B. Tech in Chemical and Electrochemical Engineering at Central Electrochemical Research Institute, Karaikudi, M. Tech in Chemical Engineering at Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur, and Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering from University of Florida, Gainesville, USA. He briefly taught at Santa Fe College, Gainesville, and worked as a Visiting Research Scholar at the Clean Energy Research Center, University of South Florida, Tampa.

Kalaimamani Dr. B. M. Sundaram

A renowned musicologist, critic, freelancer, researcher, and connoisseur in music, Dr. B. M. Sundaram is a treasure tove of rare knowledge in music, dance, and theatre forms in India. He has authored several books on music and musicians, including the biography of *Sangita Kalanidhi* Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna and *Tala Sangraham, Palayazhi,* and *Mangal Isai Mannargal.* He worked as an assistant under the renowned film music composer G. Ramanathan. He worked at the All India Radio. He is a multilingualist, being proficient in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, Malayalam, Gujarati, Urdu, and English. He has been decorated with many awards including the *Kalaimamani* and*Kalabharathi Award.* He is a

Visiting Professor at Wesleyan University, Connecticut, and Norton College, Massachusetts, USA.

Kalaimamani B. Herambanathan

Guru *Kalaimamani* B. Herambanathan is a disciple of *Kalaimamani* T.G Bavu Pillai, *Kalaimamani* T.M Arunachalam Pillai and *Isai Perarignar* K.P.Kittappa Pillai. He began his career in Bharathanatyam as dance master and choreographer in 1967.He established 'Thanjavur Bavu Pillai Dance School" in 1989 in memory of his father, *Kalaimamani* T. G. Bavu Pillai. Following this he has trained thousands of students both locally and abroad as well as conducted hundreds of arangetrams.He has gone on numerous overseas trips to Malaysia, Singapore and United States of America for Bharathanatyam trainings, and conducting dance dramas.Awards from various organizations is a prove of his dedication and passion for this art form; "Kalaimamani-Bhagavatha Mela Artiste" from Eyal Isai Nataka Mandram, State Government of Tamil Nadu, "Thalaikol Aasan" by the Thanjavur Assosiation of Musicians, "Natya Kalai Arasu" & "Nattuva Mamani" by Tamizh Sangam Thiruvaiyaru,"Kuravanji Natya Nataka Virpanar" by Sri Subramaniar Devasthanam, Sivanmalai, Award of Gold Medal By Vipanchi Natya Palli, Chennai, Award of Silver Medal by Natyanjali Committee, Chidambaram and "Perumpana Nambi" by Kudandhai Sundaresanar Nadu Kan Kuzhu, Thiruthavathurai.Shri Herambanathan has provided his support and tutelage to the Mellatur and Saliyamangalam 'Bhagavatha Mela' dance programs from 1970 till to date. He has had the honor of accompanying the late Shri Balu Bhagavathar, Shri T.G Bavu Pillai, Shri K.P Kittappa Pillai on the nattauvangam and mridangam. Revival of 'Kaisika Puranam, the temple theater by Kalaimamani Dr. Anitha Ratnam and Professor S. Ramanujam has Shri Herambanathan as the choreographer and teacher till to date. He also has been the master choreographer for "Nandhan Kathai" and "Kongai Thee" drama written by the famous writer Mr. Indira Parthasarathy and directed by Dr. R. Raju.

Kudavasal Dr. M. Balasubramanian

A renowned epigraphist and historian, *Kudavayil* Dr. M. Balasubramanian is an expert in the temples of South India. He was former curator and publication manager at the Saraswati Mahal Library at Thanjavur. He obtained his PhD for researching on the art of gopurams in Tamil Nadu. He has published over 25 books and numerous articles in leading magazines on the various temples in South India. Among the noted books authored by him are *Nandipuram* and *Rajarajeswaram.*

Prof. S. Ramanujam

Born in 1935 in the village of Nanguneri in Tamil Nadu, Shri S. Ramanujam took a Master's degree in English before obtaining his diploma in drama from the National School of Drama in Delhi in 1967. He then worked as a Lecturer in Fine Arts at the Rural University in Gandhigram up to 1977, moving thence to the School of Drama at Calicut University, where he was Assistant Director till 1985. In his final assignment as a teacher, Shri Ramanujam was Professor and Head of the Department of Drama at Tamil University, Thanjavur, where he served up to 1995.Together with his work in the sphere of the theatre education, Shri Ramanujam has worked all through as a director on the stage, with over fifty productions to his credit in Tamil and Malayalam. He has also produced a few plays in Telugu, Hindi, and English. Karuththa Deivathe Thedi in Malayalam, Variattam in Tamil, and a Telugu version of Bhasa's Urubhangam are counted among his major productions. Shri Ramanujam has also worked actively to promote the children's theatre in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, revive traditional performances such as Thapaattam in Thanjavur, and reconstruct the lost temple theatre form of Kaisikapurana Natakam. He has written a dozen plays and adaptations, published several books on the practice of theatre in Tamil and English, and contributed numerous papers and articles to seminars and periodicals. Among other honours, Shri Ramanujam was conferred the Professor Sankara Pillai Award by the institution Rangaprabhath in 2001. He was elected a Fellow of the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academy in 2002. Shri S. Ramanujam also received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for his contribution to Indian theatre as a director.

Dr. Pappu Venugopala Rao

Dr.Pappu Venugopala Rao, (born 1948) a well- known scholar, poet, musicologist, Sanskritist, dance expert, writer and orator has more than 20 books on various subjects to his credit. The most recent of his books that have received acclaim are 'Flowers at His Feet', 'Science of Śr□cakra' , 'Rasamanjari', 'Bunch of Javalis' and Nritta Rathnavaii; he has presented and published over 100 research papers. After 32 years of service as academic administrator with the American Institute of Indian Studies, Dr.Rao now holds many important portfolios in prominent institutions including the University of Hyderabad and Tumkur University. He is a member of the Academic Council of Kalakshetra, Member of Experts Committee and Secretary, Madras Music Academy, Editor, Journal of the Music Academy, Editor, *Sangita Sampradaya Pradarshini* (English Translation), and Member, Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi. He is the coordinator of the Sri Venkateswara Bhakti Channel of Tirumala Tirupathi Devsathanams.His lectures on music, dance and literature and workshops on Natya Sastra given all over the world, particularly at the Harvard University , have received high critical acclaim and an equal amount of appreciation from artistes and rasikas. He has been awarded the artiste of the year by the Bangalore Gayana Samaja, Nritya Kala Sagara by the Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana, the Musicologist Award, Music Forum, Mumbai, and Sangeeta Sastra Visaarada.

Prof. M. L. Samaga

A retired Professor of English and former Principal of MGM College, Udupi, Prof. M. L. Samaga is a renowned Yakashagana artiste for more than 40 years, proficient in both male and female roles, in both styles Tenkutittu and Badagutittu., and in both formats Aata and Talamaddale. He is the president of Karnataka Yakshagana and Bayalata Academy.

Dr. K. G. Paulose

K G Paulose was the first Vice chancellor of Keralakalamandalam Deemed University for Art and Culture from 2007. He has held positions like

Registrar of Sree Sankaracharya University, Kalady; Chief Editor Publications, Aryavaidyasala Kottakkal; Chairman Chinmaya International Sodh Sansthan and Principal of Govt.Sanskrit College Tripunithura. He has specialised in the areas of Comparative Aesthetics, Natyasastra, Ancient Theatre and Kutiyattam. He has authored twenty and edited over fifty books and published many Research papers. He was the Chief Editor of three research journals-Purnatrayi, Aryavadyan and Dhimahi. Two of his important publications are – Natankusa - A critique of Dramaturgy (1993) and Kutiyattam Theatre - The Earliest Living Tradition (2006). Several distinctions were bestowed upon him including the awards of Kerala Sahitya Akademi and Kerala Sangeeta Nataka Akademi.Thirupati Sanskrit Viswavidyalaya conferred on him the title of Vachaspati in 2009. Professor Paulose is now a Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Rastrapatinivas, Shimla.

A. Harindranath and A. Purushothaman

A. Harindranath and A. Purushothaman are connoisseurs in the art form of Krishnanattam.Dr. A. Harindranath is currently Senior Professor in Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, Kolkata. He obtained his PhD in Theoretical Nuclear Physics at the City University of New York in 1985, and was a post-doctoral fellow at Iowa State University, California Institute of Technology, and The Ohio State University. He has co-authored more than 60 publications in international journals and guided five PhD theses in the area of quantum field theory.

A. Purushothaman is a chemical engineer, with a B. Tech in Chemical Engineering from IIT Madras and M. Tech in Chemical Engineering from IIT Bombay. He is currently working as Project Manager in design of chemical and pharmaceutical plants. Both of them maintain a website: http://www.dvaipayana.net/, which is rich in resources on Krishnanattam, Mahabharatam, Harivamsam, and Malayalam literature.

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